

## Chapter 1

My name is Countess Daphne Potter. Let me tell you about my best friend, the man that I love, my lover, the Father of my children, the Lord of our House, the Boy-Who-Lived and the Defeater of the Dark Lord. Let me tell you about my Harry...

.oOo.

30 June 1996

The bruised, bloody and broken body of Harry Potter stumbled down the sidewalk of Privet Drive.

Just before the intersection of Privet Drive and Magnolia Walk his body gave out and he collapsed on the lawn of Norman and Anthony Bates. The gay couple had been the talk of the area for the last year after they moved in, but Harry had liked them well enough. They'd absorbed most of the malicious gossip which in Harry's mind was a good thing; heat on you is heat off me.

He lay on the grass panting and bleeding from his nose, left ear and numerous cuts and scrapes. There was a stabbing pain in his chest when he breathed in and he occasionally coughed up blood. Both of his eyes were swollen to slits, his nose badly broken and flattened across his face. His lips were split and if you looked closely, you could see the stumps of his broken off front teeth. There was an odd cut across the bridge of Harry's nose where his shattering glasses had cut him as they ended their career. After all the repairing, both magical and mundane, they'd finally given up the ghost in the face of Vernon's rage.

Harry had hoped that the confrontation at Platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$  by members of the Order of the Phoenix would help him some for the forthcoming summer.

He was wrong.

In an enraged fit, Vernon decided to show Harry who was really in charge.

Harry had been washing the pots and pans after dinner, Petunia always insisted they be done by hand so as not to ruin the non-stick finish. His thoughts were in their newly accustomed pattern: self-loathing for the perceived responsibility for Sirius' death.

Without warning, Vernon's meaty paw grabbed the hair on the back of the young Wizard's head and slammed his face into the porcelain ridge of the kitchen sink, shattering Harry's front two teeth.

So it began.

It ended with Harry's stumbling out of the house an hour later; wand broken, magical possessions burned in his trunk in the back garden and Harry evicted from the house with nothing but the clothes on his back. As Harry lay on the Bates' lawn, he had only one thought flit through his pain-addled mind: "Help Me"

With a pop, Harry left Privet Drive for the last time in his life.

.oOo.

Daphne Greengrass hated her life.

Maybe that was a bit strong, but her father was a right vicious bastard. He never hit her, but his tongue was as sharp as a razor and he was not averse to using some the Lesser Pain curses such as the Torqueo Curse to make his point. Like he had tonight.

It had started as a mild disagreement; Cyrus Greengrass wanted Daphne to publicly align herself with Draco Malfoy at school. To Daphne, this was an obvious ploy to have her act as her father's

spokesman.

The Greengrass family would be known to support the Dark Lord, yet not have to publicly risk themselves. Cyrus would never put himself in a position where he would have to meet with some of the people of whom he was secretly terrified. Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrange casually came to mind. Not only would he be able to avoid the uncomfortable acquaintance, but he never really had to commit to do anything. This way, if the unthinkable happened and the Dark Lord was defeated, he had no mark. He'd done nothing illegal.

A very cunning idea that Daphne wanted absolutely nothing to do with. Secretly, she wondered if her father wasn't being a bit naïve. Surely the Dark Lord would come to claim what was being inferred, wouldn't he? Daphne had tried to subtly turn him away by making noises of understanding while eating her dinner, yet never really agreeing with him or acceding to his 'request'. She was not the only Slytherin in the house, though, and he recognized her game.

He directly asked (or was it ordered?) her to act in accordance with his desires and she attempted to defer a response, asking for time to consider.

Cyrus had narrowed his eyes and without looking away from his daughter, ordered the rest of the family to leave the table. Daphne's mother, Evelyn, had led Daphne's younger siblings Astoria and Philip out of the room and then attempted to reenter. However, Cyrus had already closed and locked the doors against her.

Recognizing that subterfuge had failed, Daphne decided that she'd really earn her punishment and the last thing she remembered before succumbing to the pain of the Torqueo Curse, was calling her father a coward for co-opting his sixteen year old daughter into declaring his political alliances.

Her mother had been pounding on the door the entire time her

husband had been berating her daughter, but when Daphne had started to shriek, Evelyn drew her wand and for the first time in her life cast the Blasting curse. The old oak doors of the dining room hadn't survived the novelty experience.

A white faced Cyrus Greengrass stared at his wife, glanced at the trembling girl on the floor and stalked out of the room.

After a quick Ennervate and a pain relief potion provided by the family house elf, Daphne had hugged her mother and gone for a walk on the grounds to collect her thoughts.

She didn't hate her father any more now than she did before dinner. This wasn't the first, nor did she assume was it the last time he would use the Torqueo Curse on her. She really didn't want any part of his plan and was trying to find a way out. Her reasons were actually quite simple.

First of all, Malfoy was an incompetent, arrogant prick with poor hygiene. Fortunately, that bitchy cow Parkinson was saddled with him so that wasn't an issue. Any kind of association with the inbred moron was doomed to an ignominious end.

Second, she didn't support the Dark Lord. Daphne was a pureblood through and through. She thoroughly enjoyed the perks and advantages that being a pureblood Witch brought, but the whole 'mudbloods are animals' issue that the Dark Lord espoused sickened her as the ravings of a bigoted lunatic.

Her best friend was Tracey Davis and Tracey's mother was a muggleborn. Belinda Davis was a wonderful woman who learned the rules, written and unwritten, of Wizarding society and when she married Stephen, the pureblood scion of the Davis house, she was able to move in said society and know her role. Her marriage had offset her blood status, but what had most impressed Wizarding high society was that Belinda Davis played by the rules.

If Belinda Davis was to be labeled an animal by the philosophy of the Dark Lord and his followers, then Daphne Greengrass wanted nothing to do with them. They had no class, no honor. They were merely thugs looking for an excuse to rape, pillage and kill.

No, she wanted no part of that world.

Daphne wandered down the trails of their summer home in the Lake District. She loved it here for the silence and peace that she seemed to absorb from the surroundings. Sitting on a boulder next to a swiftly running stream, she pondered the owner of the property on the other side of the small body of water.

Harry Potter.

She knew his family owned the property on the other side of the stream and assumed that the Potters had a summer home there as well. She never understood his actions at school. His bravery was unquestioned and if half the rumours about his adventures were true, he truly was a Gryffindor Lion.

But his clothes were a mess, what he was thinking by wearing those...rags. Even his robes were merely adequate. "He's Head of one of the Fifteen, for all that's holy" she muttered. He always was trying to blend in and not be noticed. I understand not wanting to be known as the boy-who-lived. After all, he's the boy-who-lived because his parents did not.

But he's Lord Potter for crying out loud!

His eyes. Now that was something else altogether. The look that settled on her face made it obvious that her thoughts were less than proper and more lascivious than she may have even realized herself.

She was a pretty young woman but not in a conventional manner.

Her blue eyes were so bright as to be disturbing to some. Daphne's long jet black hair was wavy and her slightly prominent nose complemented her strong jaw. She was curvy in all the right places but no one would ever call her busty. Her figure was that of slim athletic grace. Slightly taller than the average girl, she projected feminine strength to all and to the two boys she'd dated, they'd melted under the radiance of her smile.

Her musings were interrupted by the loud CRACK of apparition on the other side of the stream, partway up the hill. This was followed by a loud crashing as something came (falling?) down the hill. A loud yelp was followed by an ear piercing scream as a body bounced off a log directly opposite Daphne on the Potter side of the stream.

Without thinking about any wards that could be active, Daphne gathered herself and leapt across the stream.

.oOo.

An hour and a half later, Harry Potter lay on a stripped bed while two women continued to patch him up like an old shirt.

Once Daphne had recognized the bleeding and broken body as the boy-who-lived, she had apparated back to the house and found her mother. Whispering what she had found, the elder female Greengrasses had gathered healing supplies and together, they apparated back to Harry.

Evelyn had been studying to be a healer when she and Cyrus had married and she had forsaken that career for that of a stay at home mother and matron of Clan Greengrass when Cyrus' father eventually passed on. As a pureblood daughter of the house of Davies, she had been trained all her life about her duty and her healer training had been the only real rebellion she had mustered against said duty.

Upon seeing the moaning and semi-conscious Potter heir, her first move had been to stun him. After laying him out flat, she had Daphne get to work on the non life threatening injuries: both legs were broken, an arm and he had glass in his eyes.

Evelyn was pulling on her deeply buried knowledge and the obvious internal injuries scared her. Her diagnostic spell had shown a ruptured spleen, perforated lung, perforated stomach and a bruised liver on top of four broken ribs. Fortunately his skull was not damaged, nor the brain inside.

Once she had Daphne busy with Summoning the splinters of glass out of the boy's eyes, Evelyn began working on the internal injuries. Twice Harry had convulsed and twice the women could only wait until he was done.

Evelyn had called for Matty, their house elf for more potions and also if she knew where the Potter house was located. Matty returned with the potions, as well as, direction to the house.

Now that Harry was seemingly out of danger, Evelyn levitated the wounded young man up the path as Daphne followed Matty.

They found a typical Victorian style summer house with expansive porches and probably ten bedrooms to accommodate the many expected visitors.

As they mounted the front porch, Harry began to shake and convulse. Evelyn backed up, thinking there might have been a ward on the house itself, but Harry continued to convulse. She now ran in the house and up the stairs. Shouting for Daphne and Matty to strip a bed, she followed them into the master suite and laid Harry on the bare mattress.

"It's like he's going through withdrawal from an addictive potion" the onetime apprentice healer murmured out loud.

"Not Potter" her daughter answered as she opened an armoire. Finding what she was looking for, she returned to her mother and handed her a folded leather belt. "He might do a whole host of stupid things, but drugs are not on that list." After a moment she added, "I think."

Evelyn nodded and put the belt between the remains of the young man's teeth so he didn't further injure his mouth in his convulsions.

Harry's convulsions eased and Evelyn stood, wiping her brow with a blood stained hand. After a few moments she said, "I need to get George, he's a real healer. I'll overlook something or screw something up and kill this young man. Will you be alright if I leave you here with him for a bit?"

"I'll be fine." She nodded and then followed up with "Mother, may I use magic in your absence?"

"Yes, daughter, use whatever spells you deem needful in my absence" Evelyn said, finishing the old permission that not many knew existed. Permission granted by a parent (magical of course) constituted a temporary waiver to the underage restriction of the use of magic.

An hour later, Evelyn returned with George Stebbins, an old childhood friend of hers and they found Daphne had cleaned up the injured young man quite thoroughly. All the blood had been wiped clean and she had even used some cleaning charms on his hair.

George nodded at the young woman and moved to the bedside and began to work. After ten minutes, he stood and said, "Good work Evelyn, Daphne, you saved his life. I had to tweak a few of the healing spells you put into place, but on the whole, he's going to be alright. I'll fetch a bottle of Skele-gro for the fractures and I need to check on one thing.



"The convulsions spurred me to check for an addiction of some kind and found none. I checked for other diseases like epilepsy and the like and found none. There was a diagnostic result that reminded me of something I read in a medical journal, oh...ten years ago or so. I'll pop to my office, find the journal, grab the Skele-gro and be back in a half hour or so."

He packed up his kit, setting aside a few shrunken boxes of pain relief potions and addressed his old friend, "Are you sure you don't want him at St. Mungo's?"

Evelyn nodded. She and Daphne had discussed this as they treated him by the stream bed. They figured that Death Eaters had done this and he'd be an easy target at the hospital.

George nodded and was off. Evelyn turned to her daughter and said, "If you'd like, I'll stay with Harry and you can get some rest."

Daphne shook her head, "No, you go home. Father will expect me to avoid him for the next few days, but you need to be home." Looking at the floor she almost whispered, "To protect Astoria and Philip."

"Just have Matty bring me some clean clothes and food for meals."

Evelyn sniffled a bit at the violence that her husband had performed on her eldest daughter. She leaned forward, bussed Daphne's forehead and murmured, "I love you blue eyes" before apparating away.

.oOo.

George had returned with the Skele-gro and no news. "I couldn't find the article I remember. He seems to be doing well, but I really want to know now about those convulsions. That's obviously not normal. I'll keep digging and let your mother know." He had given her the

directions on how to administer potions to an unconscious patient and a few other things then left with a pat on the young woman's shoulder and a word of advice, "Get some rest yourself, Daphne. You're holding on by a thread. I'll be by tomorrow morning."

A half hour later, she stared at the sleeping Harry with trepidation. She'd tried sleeping in the wingback chair in the corner of the room to no avail. She didn't want to go to another bedroom where she might not hear him if he needed help. That left one place.

With a sigh of combined resignation and embarrassment, Daphne climbed onto the king sized bed opposite Harry. "Please gods, let me wake up before him."

.oOo.

01 July 1996

Of course, she didn't.

"Daphne?"

The weak whisper barely broke through her dream state and for a long moment she had absolutely no idea where she was, who was talking to her and who she was. So it was a fairly groggy Daphne Greengrass that rolled away from a now awake Harry Potter and mumbled, "Five more minutes."

Harry smiled, things couldn't be that bad.

"Daphne, wake up, I need to use the loo and don't know where it is."

"Dammit Harry, I'm sleepin'"

Now he gave a weak chuckle that ended with a rasping cough that woke his bed-mate up entirely.

"Harry!" she was awake now. Sitting up and rubbing the sleep out of her eyes she said, "Explanations later; how do you feel?"

"Like my Uncle damn near beat me to death last night."

She stared open mouthed at him. "Your Uncle...?" she half whispered.

"Yeah. Where's the loo?"

Daphne's expression went from stunned to annoyed. "You broke both your legs and a whole host of other things, you aren't going anywhere." She then performed the charm her 'Uncle' George had showed her and the pressure in Harry's bladder disappeared.

He sighed in relief and said, "How did I get here and where is here?"

Daphne explained the events of the previous evening starting with his surprise appearance across the stream from him. This in turn prompted questions about the house they were in. "All I know is that this is a Potter home" and she gestured to the wall above the mantle.

There on the wall was a gilded bas-relief of the Potter family crest; a rampant lion holding a sword, point down in its right paw. Above the lion was POTTER and below was written FORTUNE FAVORS THE BOLD.

With a smile, Harry fell asleep.

Daphne lay there for a bit, watching him sleep. The swelling on his face was mostly gone due to the potions from the previous evening. He was still black and blue, but was fading to yellow and green. The Skele-gro had done its work and Harry's teeth had regrown. She assumed his legs and arm had healed the same.

She hadn't thought to ask, but since he didn't mention it, his eyes were probably Ok too.

"Matty"

A few moments later the young house elf popped in and then out to fetch some breakfast and clean clothes for Daphne. Walking into the massive bathroom to shower and change, Daphne appreciated the obvious wealth on display. Her parents didn't share a room and hadn't as far back as she could remember. This bathroom was far nicer than her father's though. Even back at the manor house, his loo wasn't this nice.

She ate her breakfast and then gently sat next to him on the bed and said, "Harry, wake up. It's time for breakfast."

She saw him smile and he said, "Five more minutes."

She laughed and said, "Ok you big faker, you can do this all yourself."

She eventually helped him into an upright position and got him his breakfast. He moved gingerly and was becoming more and more withdrawn as the meal went on. She watched him attentively as his forkfuls of eggs got smaller and he left his bacon alone. Ignoring the kippers altogether, eventually he only sipped at his tea and nibbled his toast. At last, she realized what was going on; he was embarrassed that she knew his uncle had beaten him so badly.

Daphne walked around the bed and sat down on 'her side'. After getting settled, she noticed that he was watching her and ignoring the rest of his food. Good.

"Last night my Father placed me under the Torqueo Curse."

She paused when she heard him gasp and then looked him in the

eye. "He does it fairly regularly for various reasons; to make me do what he wants, to punish me or just for fun sometimes. The only reason I've not run mad is my Mother. She does everything she can to protect me and my brother and sister."

She took a deep breath and took the plunge, "It isn't your fault your Uncle is a beast Harry, just as it isn't my fault my Father is a beast."

For a moment they just stared at each other, then a solitary tear leaked out of Harry's left eye and wandered down his cheek. She reached out and took his hand, squeezing in comfort, solidarity and compassion.

Her mother had always been there for her. Every time she was abused, her mother came. After the first time, she had explained to the eight year old Daphne about Marriage Contracts and why she couldn't leave her husband until he was convicted of breaking the law.

Unfortunately, child abuse was not illegal in the Wizarding world.

Evelyn Greengrass did everything she could to counteract the destruction and the out and out evil that her husband perpetrated on her children. Daphne was turning out to be a fine woman, so Evelyn's work was successful so far.

"Thank you"

"Anytime, Harry."

.oOo.

After breakfast they chatted for a bit. Daphne and Tracey Davis had always been what he called, 'the Oddball Slytherins' and he told her so.

"I don't know if I'm insulted or amused."

A softly chuckling Harry said, "Let me explain before you finish me off" to which she smiled.

Harry's stomach flip-flopped at her smile and then said, "You and Tracey never toady up to Malfoy, you aren't part of the Sneering Snivellus crowd. You seem to keep your heads down, get your work done and not to piss anyone off. Therefore, from my perspective, you two are oddballs."

At this, she laughed outright.

"Even Ron can't find anything wrong with you" to which her smile turned into a scowl. "Though I doubt he'd want to have lunch with the two of you anytime soon." He got a Marauder smile and said, "His loss, my gain."

"Why Mr. Potter, are you flirting with me?" asked a heavily blushing Daphne.

"Pain potions"

"Too bad" she said huskily and the boy-who-lived had the tables turned on him in a flash and his blush bulb was burning bright to his nurse's delight.

Healer Stebbins stopped by and checked on Harry's progress, pleased at his rapid healing from the trauma. "I've not found that other issue" he told the teens after explaining everything to Harry. "But I'll keep looking. Take your potions, and take it easy. You can get up and move around a bit tomorrow."

Addressing Daphne, he said, "You keep him from overexerting himself."

She snorted and darted her eyes at a smiling Harry.

He napped until lunch and Matty brought Daphne's books so she could work ahead in her courses. When Harry woke at noon, he saw the raven haired girl with her hair in a ponytail, a quill twirling in her hand while she mumbled aloud an incantation she was reading from a book.

"What are you working on?"

Surprised, she looked up quickly. "Transfiguration for next year."

"Pretty impressive. I thought Hermione was the only person who worked ahead like that."

Daphne scoffed, "No, Granger is the only person who makes it very clear that she works ahead like that. The bulk of Ravenclaw does, Tracey and I do and I know for a fact that Sue Bones is finished pre-reading the entire sixth year curriculum for Charms, Transfiguration, Defense and Arithmancy. We just don't show off like Granger does."

Harry frowned, "That's a bit rough, isn't it?"

"Harry, name one other student who is such an incredible suck up to the teachers. Do you know she isn't even number one in the school? Padma Patil is, followed by Tracey. Granger is fourth."

"Really? Who's third?"

"Me" Daphne muttered.

She looked at her budding new friend and said, "Look, I know Granger is one of your best friends, and I know you've been through a lot together. It's just that the 'know-it-all' attitude really bothers me sometimes. I know Malfoy calls her that, but she really is, and it's not

an endearing trait."

Harry lay there and tried to be objective and look at his bushy haired friend in a new way. After a few minutes he looked at Daphne and saw that she was noticeably worried about his reaction. He patted 'her side' of the bed and she joined him with a small sigh of relief.

"I think you're right. Hermione is a great person who has flaws; this is one of her flaws. Doesn't mean she's a bad person, just that she's not perfect."

With a surprised look Daphne said, "I'm impressed. Are you sure you're not a girl? Guys don't have that kind of maturity."

They laughed and Matty popped in with lunch.

After lunch, he borrowed her copy of the Standard Book of Spells, Grade 6 and began to read ahead as well. Daphne went outside and found a stick that he could use as a dummy to practice wand movements until he got a new wand.

Evelyn came by early in the afternoon to see how Harry fared and was buried under the profuse thanks of the Potter heir. "Not to worry, Harry. I'm glad I helped you and didn't hurt you. My training was quite a while ago and I've not kept up. How are you two getting on? Homework I see."

Both teens nodded, holding up their respective books.

"Harry, I'm going to send Matty over later today to take your measurements to have her whip up some clothes for you until we can go shopping for replacements."

Harry nodded and then looked at his lap. "I'll need a new wand as well."



Both the Greengrasses looked horrified. Daphne crawled up next to him on the bed to her mother's raised eyebrows and held Harry's hand.

"Your uncle?"

Harry nodded. "Everything. He burnt everything. I had an album of pictures of my parents, my dad's invisibility cloak and some letters from my godfather." His voice trailed off and the solitary tear returned, "They're all gone."

Daphne gently hugged Harry to her breast while he cried. Harry then did something he'd never done before and hugged her back. It felt good to cry and let the dam burst. He wailed like a child; for his parents, for his godfather, for himself.

A bit later, neither knew how long, his sobs dried up and they lay there on the bed for a bit, taking comfort in each others arms. Evelyn had slipped out long before. Daphne had never experienced someone let their guard down that completely. It was almost as draining for her as it was for him.

Eventually he stirred, squeezed her gently and murmured, "Thanks, again."

"Anytime, Harry."

.oOo.

The rest of the afternoon and early evening was quiet. The two teens had established an extraordinary level of trust and intimacy between them that at times drew them to holding hands as they studied on the bed, and other times made Daphne flee the room to the loo to escape the intensity of it all.

They talked about their lives. Harry didn't need to say much about the

Dursleys and didn't want to either. Daphne understood. He told her about the Philosophers Stone, the Basilisk and the Chamber (leaving Ginny's name out, of course) and about Sirius. He almost broke down again when he mentioned his godfather's name.

She cuddled up to his side, steadying him and he told the story. The Secret Keeper change, Wormtail, the Muggles in the alley and so on. Daphne had heard the official line on Sirius Black, and it didn't surprise her much that the official story and the true story had been so divergent and she told her new friend that.

Harry gave a short mirthless laugh and then stared at the ceiling while stroking her hair. The Department of Mysteries came next. Haltingly, painfully, he ground out the story in the most exquisite detail he could master. He had to. He felt like he owed it to Sirius.

Every drop of blood shed, every injury sustained, every word said, spoken or screamed.

"...and he fell back through the veil. His expression was...stunned? Surprised? Something like that. I don't know if what Lestrangle cast at him was even lethal, but he's gone now. Gone, and it's my fault."

Daphne gave him a gentle hug and then propped herself up on her elbows, close enough to his face so that he could see her properly. If her mother walked in she would have sworn the teens had been snogging.

"I believe that I'm the only person you've told the entire story to? No one else, save Longbottom was conscious for the whole thing right?" He nodded. "I'll say this once and only once, then. It's. Not. Your. Fault." She poked him in the chest with her forefinger with each word, emphasizing her scowl that much more.

"But..." and he was cut off with a gesture from her.

"Did you cast the curse at your godfather?"

"No"

"Did you make him come after you?"

"No"

Now she just glared at him until he nodded in resignation, but he couldn't take his eyes from hers. After a moment, his green sparkled with the brilliance of her blue. Her scowl softened until she just murmured, "Oh, my" and kissed him. Her hands were in his hair and his were moving across her back, pulling her on top of him. The kiss deepened and tongues dueled while both teens groaned with passion and desire.

Finally, he gave a yelp of pain as one of his newly healed ribs gave a sharp cry of protest. They broke their kiss and she blushed brightly, while he smiled.

"That was brilliant"

She snuggled into his good side and murmured, "I can't believe this happened so fast."

Harry smiled, "I'm glad it did"

"Me too"

.oOo.

They awoke when Matty popped in with their dinners. After a quick debate and a promise from Harry not to do anything 'stupid', he was allowed to head for the loo while Matty set up dinner. When he got back he said, "Whoa, sheets! I must have been a good boy."

Daphne rolled her eyes, "Hardly. Mum was worried that you could hurt yourself with the convulsions, so she wanted the bed bare. You haven't had one in 24 hours, so you get sheets back. Now lie down."

Harry hid a smile; he was enjoying this much more than the hospital wing. Matty popped away to serve dinner at the house and after eating most of his food (an excellent roast), Harry fidgeted for a moment before saying, "Daphne?"

She looked up at him from her plate and said, "Hmm?"

"Will you be my girlfriend?"

The Slytherin Oddball, swallowed the potato in her mouth, set her plate on the nightstand, put Harry's plate on his nightstand, then smiled radiantly and said, "Yes" before kissing him. Moments later, the young man in question would not have been able to remember his own name, much less talk coherently.

.oOo.

They cuddled through the evening, talking quietly and sharing kisses every so often. Sirius. Her father and his plans. School. Even Quidditch was discussed as Harry found out that Daphne was a rabid Puddlemere United fan.

Harry's injuries were mostly healed thanks to the prompt action of Evelyn and to a lesser extent, Daphne. He was sore and a little weak, but overall Ok.

Matty popped in with an evening bag for Daphne and a shaving kit for Harry. While Daphne was in the shower his thought wandered over various topics.

He saw that Evelyn had assembled the standard male shaving kit for him. The soap was even the kind he liked.

He felt good here in his home. He was never going back to the Dursley's, that was for sure, Dumbledore be damned.

Daphne was a godsend. He'd noticed her at school, how could he not? But the silver and green piping on her robes had intimidated him.

Maybe it is for the best that Uncle Vernon is such an animal.

He realized that he'd gone with his instincts on asking her to be his girl, but so far his instincts weren't wrong. Going to the Department of Mysteries hadn't been about his instincts, but about his fear. He could now see how Voldemort had played him like a fiddle.

Dance to the tune, Harry. Dance to the tune.

The prophecy. Daphne deserved to know. If they were going to be together, she would be a target and unlike Dumbledore, he was going to tell her up front so she could make an informed decision. Maybe tell her a basic summary of it?

She came out of the bathroom wearing silk pajamas that made Harry's mouth dry among other things. They were nothing special; a soft purple color with trousers and button up top but it was the way she wore it that made him stand up and pay attention.

"You're beautiful"

She smiled and blushed. "Thank you kind sir. Are you up to showering?"

He tested his legs and found no pain so he slowly shuffled into the bathroom for a shower.

"If you need any help in the shower, call" she said from behind him.

With a smile, he turned to her and said, "Geez, Daph, we just started dating this afternoon" which prompted a pillow to become airborne in the general vicinity of his head.

That night was the most restful sleep Harry had in his memory. He woke up to a faceful of jet black hair scented with lavender and he could only smile.

AN

1. I own nothing.

2. Torqueo: (Latin) to twist, curl, rack, torture, torment, distort. I imagine this curse to be a poor man's Cruciatus. Instead of thousands of white hot knives, imagine severe cramping of every muscle in your body at the same time. You know, that cramp in the arch of your foot that wakes you up in the middle of the night making you scream? Yeah that one. All over your body. Ouch. Not nice.

3. Looking at my own life, it seems like it's all about relationships. My relationship with my wife, my kids, my boss, my co-workers, and so on. Within the context of these relationships, my life happens. This is the prism that I'm looking through for this fic. Also, it's third person but focuses on Daphne instead of Harry. When she isn't with Harry, the only way we know about his activities or thoughts, is because he told her after the fact. There will be many times that HP is off doing stuff without Daphne and the reader won't know. I will, 'cause I'm the evil author. (Cue spooky music) bwahahahahaha

4. This is a shorter chapter, I wanted to set everything up but not get the ball really moving. Also, this story is a whirlwind romance type of story. My first two stories were Harry/Hermione and therefore Harry and his beloved had a much slower build up. Not so here. I have been utterly and completely stuck on To Stand Against the Darkness and All Because of a Hippogriff. I know where the story(s) is

supposed to go (vaguely), but between some wicked medical problems that are only now being resolved and losing all excitement and interest for continuing, I've done what someone once advised me to do. Write about something else. On Fanfiction authors dot net, Jeconais utterly and completely polluted me. First I read his Harry/Gabrielle stories (Hope, Once More and Happily Ever After) which got me writing one of my own. I've got ~60k words on it done. Then I read his Harry/Daphne stories (Perfect Situations and Matroyshka Vignettes). All five stories are fantastic. This is my stab at HP/DG. Also, remember, I'm going with the 'whirlwind romance' here. Intentionally, so I don't want to see "That's not realistic" in reviews. It's what I'm intentionally doing to change Potterverse in this direction. Thanks to any and all who have been patient on my other stories. I'll get back to them (my wife says to me weekly "So what's going on in Stand?"), I promise. Hopefully Partners will help me get my groove on with the others. – muggledad

## Chapter 2

02 July 1996

When Daphne awoke, she was alone in bed and still clothed. Part of her had secretly wished to wake up and have found her nightclothes flung into different corners of the room.

That might be moving a little too fast. But just a little.

Yesterday they had accelerated their intimacy through their very personal revelations to each other and their extended alone time to fill in the blanks that they did not know about each other. She'd never felt so close to another human being. It was wonderful.

She didn't know it, but she was beginning to fall in love with Harry Potter.

After her morning ablutions, she found him sitting in a chair on the balcony off the master suite. The balcony looked quite a bit like the main porch downstairs and it overlooked the sloping valley as it descended into Ullswater Lake in the distance.

She came up behind him and put her hand on his shoulder, which he silently covered with his own.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"It is. I could live here. Imagine this view in the fall with the trees turning."

The question was on his lips but he daren't ask it yet. Would you live here with me?

He didn't know it, but he was beginning to fall in love with Daphne Greengrass.



She sat in the chair next to him and reached out for his hand, pulling it into her lap. "How are you feeling today?"

He considered for a minute, almost as if he was doing a quick inventory of himself before he said, "Not bad. Ribs are just a touch sore, but the rest is good. I'd like to go shopping today. At the very least I have to get a wand and glasses."

She nodded, "After breakfast, I'll check to see if we're on the Floo here. If we aren't, I'll have to sneak you in our house. You've used the Disillusionment charm before?" He nodded and they fell silent.

"Last night was the best night's sleep I've had in over three years" he looked directly in her piercing blue eyes. "Thank you."

She stood and straddled his lap, inches from his face, "It was wonderful being that close to you, being held by you. This is like a whirlwind, but I can't help but be swept along." She kissed him softly, "I want to be swept along" and she kissed him languidly before cuddling up to him while he wrapped his arms around her.

.oOo.

They were on the Floo so after Healer Stebbins stopped by for his morning check up, Harry dressed in plain black pants and a white collared shirt underneath plain black robes and Daphne in dark blue robes, and they used the Floo to take them directly to Gringotts.

"I don't have my key" he whispered to her.

She looked at him, stunned. "You gave your vault key to someone? Who?"

"Mrs. Weasley. Dumbledore said it wasn't safe for me to come here before last term."

She snorted in derision. "Come on, our lessons on Wizarding culture start now, love."

They walked toward a desk behind a small divider when Harry stopped and pulled his girlfriend to a stop with him. He had a stunned expression and said, "What did you just call me?"

Her confused expression melted to a goofy grin, "Love"

He leaned in and gave her a small kiss, "There will be much more of that when we get home."

"Promises, promises" she said as she sashayed over to the desk of Hornsplit, Accounts Manager.

"What?" the goblin spit at them without looking up.

Not missing a beat, Daphne scooped up the ceremonial dagger off the goblin's desk and slammed it point first through the parchment that Hornsplit had been reading.

"Fool, the head of one of the Fifteen stands before you. Show proper respect or be spitted on the bones of your ancestors."

Hornsplit looked up, stunned. When he saw Harry, his face went white and he bowed low. "My apologies my Lord."

"I need a new key for my vault."

"Yes my lord" he pulled out a small bowl and handed Harry a small knife.

"You need to put a few drops of blood in the bowl" she whispered to him.

After the deed was done, Hornsplit waved his long fingers over the bowl and muttered a goblin incantation. Two keys materialized on the desk. One looked like his old key and the other was quite a bit larger, made of silver with what looked like onyx in the head of the key.

Following Daphne's lead, Harry pocketed his old key and picked up the new one and raised an eyebrow at Hornsplit.

"For the Black Family vault, my Lord."

Harry almost fell over. Only the strong arm of his girlfriend steering him toward the entrance to the caverns kept him upright until he gained his senses again.

"Thanks"

"Anytime, Harry"

.oOo.

In his vault Daphne had whistled, "That's quite a bit of coin."

Harry hadn't the heart to visit the Black Vault, but Daphne had insisted he get account balances for his accounts and found there was another Potter vault. He'd been using a trust vault that was about six percent of the overall Potter wealth. Combined with the Black's gold, Harry wouldn't have to work for the next fifty lifetimes.

Besides the summer home and 12 Grimmauld Place, there was also Rowan Hill in Wales and a home on the Cote d'Azur that he owned.

They were on the way to the Magical Optometrist when Harry said, "What was that about the Fifteen?"

"You really don't know?"

"If I did, I wouldn't be asking."

She gave a light laugh, "True. I'm still stunned that you don't know any of this. Dumbledore may stand up for half-bloods and muggleborns, but this is borderline criminal that you know nothing about your heritage." She fixed him a beady eye, "You do realize that you hold a very important role in wizarding society and it has nothing to do with the boy-who-lived crap?"

He lifted both eyebrows in surprise and she shook her head again. "Stay with me, love. The Fifteen are the original founding families of what is now the Ministry of Magic. They were the most powerful, wealthy families of the age and they came together forming the first Wizengamot. They were all also muggle Lords. The Potters had an Earldom, and I think the Lord Black was a Viscount."

"An Earl."

She smiled at his stunned expression. "As such, you have a seat on the Wizengamot." She stopped and put her hand on Harry's arm. "We are going to have to contact Sirius' solicitors and find out the extent of your inheritance. You may be Lord Black as well and that has some significant repercussions politically."

Harry just nodded, moving a bit on autopilot until they got to the Optometrist. Harry got the magical contacts that were auto focusing for his prescription, dust free, auto cleaning. Daphne put her foot down on the seeing through objects function.

"I only want you seeing what's under my clothes" she whispered into his ear.

Harry stammered his thanks to the healer and paid for his contacts.

"Damn, woman! Why'd you do that to me? I almost swallowed my own tongue" he said smiling.

"Sorry" she said with a coquettish smile and wrapped her arm in his as they perambulated to Ollivanders.

Twelve galleons later, Harry walked out with a phoenix feather and oak wand, however, the donating phoenix wasn't Fawkes.

"So much for Priori Incantatem" he muttered.

"Huh?" she asked. So he explained about the graveyard at the end of the third task. When he was done explaining, she stopped and just stared into his eyes, hers brimming with tears.

"You've suffered so much" she whispered through her emotion.

"But I have you now" he whispered back through just as much emotion.

She hugged him tightly in the middle of Diagon Alley on a warm June morning.

.oOo.

They spent an hour or so buying Harry a new wardrobe which he suffered through only with the encouragement from his girlfriend. Kisses if he was a good mannequin. No kisses if he was a bad mannequin.

Madam Malkin's help had shrunk their purchases which Daphne had stored in her handbag when Harry said, "Come on, I want to do this."

They entered a shop that proclaimed "Phalanx Home Defense and Warders."

"Bill Weasley said these guys are the best that money can buy in the private sector" to which Daphne raised her eyebrows.

An hour later, George McGowan of Phalanx Home Defense and Warders was thirteen thousand galleons richer. Harry had said, "I want the three homes warded so heavily that Hogwarts and Gringotts are easier targets. I'll do whatever is necessary. I'll also pay extra if you can start today." Grimmauld Place was left off the list to be warded. They'd never find it anyway with Dumbledore's Fidelius in place.

They used the Floo to go home and Harry was immediately sent to bed by his girlfriend.

"You've pushed it a bit this morning buster, and I'll bet your body is reminding you that 36 hours ago you were at death's door."

"Yes, dear"

"I'll handle the warders if they show while you're asleep. Go, or no kisses."

"Who are you threatening, me or you?"

"Both of us, now get moving, man of mine."

He smiled, kissed her thoroughly enough to curl her toes and went upstairs. She was half tempted to follow him and shag him until they both passed out.

The thought made her pause. She was a virgin and based on what she knew of Harry, he was too. Neither of them had any real dating experience. In Slytherin, either the girls were ridden like brooms or stayed away from dating. She and Tracey had chosen to stay away.

But with Harry...

She wanted him and was pretty sure he wanted her. She didn't want

to come across as a slut, but how to bring it up?

Patience

Great. Something she was terrible at.

She scrawled a note in her terrible handwriting in case he woke up before she got back. A handful of Floo powder and she was gone.

.oOo.

Harry stumbled downstairs following the wonderful aroma and found Daphne at the kitchen table surrounded by parchment with lunch under a warming charm on the hob.

Glancing at the clock, he saw that it was one PM, grabbed a meat pie from the plate and walked over to the table. Rubbing her shoulders absently with his free hand, he read over her shoulder.

"What's up?"

She patted the chair next to her and said, "You know there's effectively two sets of laws for us right? The goblins do whatever the hell they want, following the Ministry only when it suits their needs. So there are the Goblin Laws and the Ministry Laws. The goblins aren't going to give you access to the Potter Vault one second before your Father's will stipulates. Obviously, Sirius allowed you immediate access."

She paused as a small cloud of grief passed over his face. He gave her a small smile and squeezed her hand so she continued.

"Now, the Ministry. You're a minor, but also the Head of at least one of the Ancient and Noble Houses, commonly called the Fifteen. There are privileges associated therein. While you were sleeping, I used the Floo to go to the Ministry and find out what, exactly, that

entailed." Here she waved her hands across the piles of parchment in front of her.

"Umm, could you summarize for me right now, I'm still not all the way awake."

"Underage magic and apparition are the biggest two." She indicated a small stack of parchment that she'd filled out for him.

"This pile is regarding your Wizengamot seat. I left that blank until we talk to Sirius' solicitor. You should also consider retaining a full time solicitor if you haven't already." When he shook his head, she said, "Look, with the Potter and Black family wealth and investments, you'll be needing one."

She handed him a parchment and quill saying, "This is a letter to Gringotts to request the name of Sirius' solicitor. You just need to sign at the bottom." Nodding, he did just that.

"This last pile is what I call 'the little stuff'. Portkey creation authorization, official Head of House accession" she paused here and got a little red faced. In a small voice she said, "It may have been a bit presumptuous, but I also got a form to void all pre-existing Marriage contracts."

He looked at her for a moment, set down his mostly eaten meat pie and took both her hands in his. He continued looking in her eyes for a few moments and she felt herself falling into the emerald depths. I don't know how, but I am falling in love with you.

"It's not presumptuous at all. I'm glad you did."

She exhaled in relief. Hoping and praying she was right she'd picked up that form. "You feeling Ok?" At his nod she said, "First, let's finish this paperwork and mail it off with my owl, then, how about a little



stroll around the grounds and see what the warders are up to before we eat our sumptuous meal?"

.oOo.

After Diomedé, Daphne's owl, winged away with quite a bit of parchment tied to her leg, the young couple set off on their walk. They found the warders in a clearing near the center of the property. Two were bent over a work table looking at the detailed rune map of the property, while four others shaped the Lodestones which would serve as the anchors for the massive wards. A new advance in warding techniques, it was a rather interesting and efficient design in that the wards actually used the magic imbued in the Earth itself to power the wards, as opposed to enchanted objects or a person. Drawing the power from the natural ley lines, Harry could end up with unbreakable wards. No one is stronger than the Earth.

A middle aged fellow with graying hair looked up and said in a Kerry brogue "Ah, Lord Potter. How do you do sir? I'm Terrence McKee, team leader. I've a few questions for you, if you have a few moments?"

They began to talk about the wards in general and when they got to keying, Harry said, "For now, only myself and Miss Greengrass are to be keyed into any of the wards; apparition, portkey, transit and Floo. We can key anyone else in beyond that."

Nodding, McKee made a note on the paper and then said, "You'll need to go out to Rowan Hill as well, sir. Joseph Riordan is team lead there and he'll need to have a similar discussion with you. I understand the team will be in France the day after tomorrow to start."

Nodding, Harry said, "How long until we are up and running?"

McKee rubbed his chin and said, "Probably four days."

"Be done tomorrow evening and I'll give you and your team a thousand galleons to split."

"Tomorrow evening it is then sir." Turning to his team, McKee said in a loud voice, "You heard the man lads, let's go!"

.oOo.

After lunch, Harry approached the Floo and with a bit of trepidation, called out, "Rowan Hill!" and hopped in the fireplace, followed shortly by Daphne.

Three hours later, two somewhat dazed teens stumbled out of the Floo and just stared at each other.

"Wow" he said.

"Yeah" she responded.

She naturally flowed into his arm for a brief hug and he said, "I think I want to live there full time and this will be our retreat."

She nodded into his chest, not really registering that he'd said out loud what they'd both been thinking.

She looked up at him and adopted a waiting expression. He frowned at her quizzically. Finally he broke the silence saying "What?"

"Kisses"

"Ah, as my lady wishes" and started with a soft kiss that became languid and finally heated when he pushed her up against the wall as she raked her hands down his back and he cupped her bum.

"Ahem"

They sprang apart like scalded cats and began blushing even before they registered that Evelyn was standing there.

"Er, hi Mum" stammered Daphne as she tried to fix her hair.

"Hello, you two. I didn't realize that you were so...close."

Harry groaned to himself. Kill me now.

Evelyn just stared at the two of them for a long minute before she said, "You two are close to being of age. I expect you to be responsible in your behavior." Turning to Daphne she said, "I am allowing you two quite a bit of unsupervised time; don't disappoint me by making me a grandmother before you turn eighteen."

They both blushed even harder, if that was possible and nodded almost frantically.

"I'm here because I was on my afternoon walk and saw the warders laying out those enormous lodestones. What's going on?"

Daphne led her mother into the parlor while Harry explained about their trip to Gringotts and the subsequent visit to Phalanx Home Defense and Warders.

Evelyn nodded approvingly. "Excellent idea Harry. I don't want to be pushy, but I do expect to be keyed into the wards with Daphne spending so much time here."

"Of course, Evelyn. I just didn't want the warding team to get more information than they needed."

With a small smile, Daphne said, "I'll make a Slytherin out of you yet."

Daphne and Harry settled back on the couch, comfortably close and

holding hands. They chatted with Evelyn for a bit about her day, Rowan Hill and laughing at Harry's 'mannequin duties'. Harry was amazed to be part of a fairly healthy family dynamic.

Evelyn was a caring mother who let her children grow up but protected them from what they needed to be protected from. He couldn't help but contrast her with Molly Weasley who wanted to smother her children with her love and shield them from all aspects of life. On the whole, he preferred Evelyn's style.

"Your father has returned to the manor house for the summer. Your siblings and I have been directed to stay here."

Daphne cocked an eyebrow, "And his grand plan with the Dark Lord?"

Evelyn shrugged, "He assumes you will carry out his wishes."

Daphne frowned at that. When Evelyn started checking her watch, Daphne stood and said, "I'll walk you out mother."

Evelyn smiled and said, "I'm so glad to see you well, Harry." She paused for a second, "And for what it's worth, I give you my blessing to court my daughter." Daphne beamed at that statement and hooked her arm in her mother's as they ambled out of the room toward the path leading to the Greengrass home.

.oOo.

The two women walked in silence, enjoying the last bit of warmth from the afternoon sun.

"I love him, mum."

Without looking at her daughter, Evelyn Greengrass smiled broadly. "Yes, you do."

"I didn't try and fall in love with him. We just talked so much, and he understands me unlike anyone else, even you."

"He's very handsome as well. He looks good without the glasses."

"Well, yes, there is that too."

Evelyn turned an amused eye on her daughter, "I too was sixteen once young lady and I saw where your hands were and where his hands were as well." She paused for a moment. "I'm not ordering you to sleep with him, but if you two decide to be intimate, please be responsible and use Contraceptive charms. There's plenty of time for children later."

Daphne nodded and pulled her mother into a hug. "I love you mum"

"I love you, too, blue eyes."

.oOo.

"You were saying that Snape tortured you under the guise of Occlumency lessons, right?"

They were cuddled on the couch in front of the fire. They'd had a magnificent snogging session and both were currently shirtless. "Yep, right bastard he was too. I'd come back from my 'lessons' feeling like I'd been hit in the head by a bludger. Repeatedly."

She tapped her manicured nail on his somewhat hairy chest. "Tracey was taught Occlumency by her great Uncle. Should we drop a letter and see if he'd be willing to tutor us? I assume the need is still real."

He took a deep breath; now he had to tell her the truth. "Yeah the need is real. Daph, I need to tell you something. Before I was born, a prophecy was made..."

Ten minutes later, he was holding his crying girlfriend in his arms feeling ashamed that he was glad she was crying instead of packing him off. She sat up in a fury and jabbed her finger into his chest. Her eyes were streaming, snot was dribbling out of her nose, her hair a mare's nest and one bra strap had slipped off her shoulder.

She was beautiful to him.

She loved him.

He loved her.

"I just got you Harry Potter, and I'm not going to lose you!" and she kissed him with all she had. She soon collapsed back into his arms, and her sobs become tears, which dried up into a few sniffles.

"Thank you for telling me. I need to know these things." She looked him in the eyes and said, "I'll do anything I can to ensure that we survive this."

He nodded in return, lovingly stroking her dark hair. "Thank you for not leaving. I was terrified you'd run far away to protect yourself." He gave a small ironic laugh, "Hell, I want to run far away to protect myself."

She blew her nose on his handkerchief and wiped her face. "Only a fool wouldn't be afraid." Snuggling back into his side she said, "Enough about this, just hold me Harry. We'll come up with a plan tomorrow. Tonight, I need you."

.oOo.

03 July 1996

She woke up the next morning still clothed in her pajamas. She could

hear the shower in the bathroom running and an atonal warbling that Harry must call singing.

"Blue moooooon, you saw me standing aloooooonnnne..."

Not for much longer she thought to herself with no small amount of amusement.

With a wicked smile, Daphne walked into the bathroom and began brushing her teeth. After rinsing her mouth, she'd noticed that Harry's off tune crooning had ceased so she began to brush out her hair. Deciding to take a shower this morning, she called out "Hurry up, or I'll climb in there with you."

There was a long pause in the shower and Daphne reached for the buttons on her pajama tops. With an audible sigh, Harry turned the water off and reached out of the opaque glass door for his towel.

A few minutes later, he came out of the extra large shower with his towel around his waist and Daphne involuntarily licked her lips. He smirked and walked up to her boldly, backing her up against the sink. His black hair stuck up in all directions and his eyes bored into hers, not letting her go. Pressing up against her, he moved in as if to kiss her. Suddenly, he stopped, looked directly in her eyes and said, "Your turn" before walking out of the bathroom to get dressed.

"Oh no you don't" she growled and chased after him.

She caught him just as he put on his boxers and he pulled her to him, knowing exactly what she wanted as it was exactly what he wanted. The atmosphere was thick, their passion and lust palpable. She jumped on him, wrapping her legs around his waist while he cupped, squeezed and supported her.

A moment later they were on the bed and Daphne's top went flying. If asked, neither would remember who actually took it off. She groaned

as his mouth dipped to her chest and she arched her back in response.

"Oh gods, Harry...wait, wait"

Later she would laugh at the dumbfounded, lust-addled expression on his face. He could only spit out, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

Now she was confused, she stroked his face and in a soft voice "Why are you sorry love?"

He flashed her a smile at the nickname, looked away and mumbled, "I'm sorry for pushing you too fast."

She pulled him into a hug, very aware of his arousal pressing against her thigh. For a moment she almost jumped off the cliff and gave in, but wanted to do this right. They both deserved it.

"Harry, if you remember, I jumped on you. I'll be very honest, I want you - badly - and have since we started getting so close."

He exhaled in relief at her reminder of her willingness in their activities and surprise washed over him with her declaration of attraction.

"Really?"

She kissed him on the nose and said, "Really. The reason I stopped us is because we were about to make love and although I really want to, and we may end up doing so later today, I wanted to talk about it first."

He paused and said, "I've never been with anyone before you" he nuzzled her neck and said, "and I'm glad. I don't know much about love or relationships or emotions, really."



She smiled at him and he said, "But in three very short days you've become my world, Daphne." He stroked her face and said in a very low whisper so that she wasn't even sure he'd spoken, "I think I love you."

Her eyes widened. Here was the moment of truth but she only grasped one of the bull's horns, not both. "I think I love you too, Harry. Thank you for respecting me enough to be so honest with me."

Their burning fires for each other had quenched, or at least been banked and he very gently kissed her. After a long embrace with much nuzzling and cooing at each other they broke apart, Daphne to her shower and Harry to sit there, amazed at his good fortune.

She's beautiful, smart, caring...what did I do to deserve her?

They eventually made it downstairs and found Hedwig perched on the back of a chair in the kitchen looking very annoyed at the world. Harry made quite a fuss over her. She'd been out hunting when Vernon had begun his rampage but Harry had still been worried about her.

After suitable demonstrations of affection for the avian member of the household were accomplished, Harry made breakfast for the human members. Daphne took the time to write Tracey a letter requesting an introduction to her great Uncle and giving her some basic generalities about her new boyfriend.

"Should I give the Floo address here, or should we visit at Tracey's?"

He paused mid-whisk and then said, "We'll visit her for now. When the warding is done, we'll talk about keying more people in, but for now I'd like to keep the access list very short."

She nodded, wearing a small smile as she wrote. He'd responded as she had hoped he would. The question wasn't a test as such, but

more like finding out his thought process.

They were eating their way through a wonderful breakfast, when Daphne said, "What about other subjects?"

Not grasping the non-sequitor, Harry looked at her quizzically while he ate another mouthful of eggs.

Twirling her fork in the air, "You know, Transfiguration, Charms, Defense. Really those three. We could get tutors to accelerate our learning or specialize in certain areas like illusions, animagus and the like."

Harry sat back in his chair, chewing and thinking. After swallowing, he said, "When Dumbledore and Voldemort dueled in the Ministry atrium I was in awe. It was as if I'd stumbled into the midst of two gods as they unleashed their fury at each other. Voldemort used mainly power spells: Killing curse, lots of dark curses and spells, Bone Breakers and so on. Dumbledore was more like a conductor weaving Animating charms, Transfiguration and also some other Power spells. The shields, well..." He shook his head at the memory. "It was amazing."

Daphne absently took his hand in hers and he smiled at the affectionate gesture. "The best in the nation are Flitwick and McGonagall, of course" she said while tapping the nails of her free hand on the table. "Do you trust them?"

He flicked his wand to set the dishes to wash and pulled her out of her chair. Holding her hand they went outside toward the trails in the woods.

"Do I trust them?" he murmured. "I trust both of them with my life. I believe they'd both fight to the death before turning me over to Voldemort and his cronies. The real question is do I trust them not to go running to the Headmaster. What do you think?"

She looked down as they ambled down the path toward Ullswater Lake. "I believe that if you explain the situation to Flitwick, he'd be trustworthy. I also think that if you started down a dark path that he couldn't dissuade you from, he'd call in for help and if that meant Dumbledore, he'd do it. I don't think that Flitwick would go running to the old man 'just because' though."

Harry considered her words and had to agree. Daphne continued, "McGonagall is like Flitwick, I think." Harry gave her an amused expression; the two were very different people.

"Hear me out you" she said with a smile. "McGonagall is scrupulously fair, like Flitwick. Where Flitwick is merry, the old battleaxe is stern, but they're both fair and, I believe, trustworthy. Snape on the other hand, is neither fair, nor trustworthy."

Harry had to smile at that. "Amen. So, maybe we invite them to tea the day after next and put forth the proposal to them if they have time?"

She nodded at that. "What about Defense?"

He pursed his lips. Immediately Remus Lupin sprang to mind, but he had quite a few questions to ask Moony. Where was he the last two years after he left Hogwarts? For that matter, where was he before Harry's third year?

After explaining his reservations about Remus to Daphne she said, "So we meet him for tea at a muggle shop and interview him. If his answers are unsatisfactory, we walk away. I'm sure I can find a few candidates" she said with a small smile.

Nodding, Harry said, "That works. I don't know anyone else suitable that the Headmaster doesn't have in his pocket and I trust."

Daphne said, "If Lupin doesn't pan out, a tutor under an Unbreakable Vow to never turn you over to Voldemort would be the next best thing."

"Turn us over to Voldie and the Voldettes you mean." She just looked at him, ignoring his humorous derogatory name. "Look, because we are together" he stopped and took both her hands in his, "Because I love you, you are now number two or three on Voldemort's capture at all cost list."

"You really love me?"

He could only nod in response.

She gave him a soft kiss and enveloped him in a warm, firm hug, melding her body to his. "It's scary that psychopath is going to be after me as soon as it gets out that we are together." She pulled back and looked him in the eye, "But you are worth it. We are worth it."

.oOo.

During their walk they saw the warders working at a furious pace, McKee just gave a brief wave as he was supervising three other wizards as they waved their wands in concert.

They ended up down at the massive finger lake and chatted quietly while sitting on a bench by the dock. "How are we going to deal with your Father?" he asked.

"Deal' as in avoid his Dark Lord machinations and allow us to continue seeing each other?"

He nodded and she said "Well, as far as our relationship goes, I just won't mention it. I doubt I'll even see him the rest of the holiday."

Harry just shook his head, half disbelieving that a father wouldn't want to see his daughter. He knew that he had a romanticized ideal of family. Growing up as he had, his ideal 'Father' and 'Mother' would always save him from the pain that was his everyday real life. 'Father' and 'Mother' could do no wrong, would never be rude, tired, out of sorts, angry, disoriented, distracted or otherwise less than perfect.

Still, how could a father care so little as to voluntarily miss spending the only time he had with his three children and wife? It was beyond his comprehension.

When he explained this to Daphne, she gave an ironic laugh and said, "The beauty of an arranged marriage. Mum knows that Father has 'other friends' and as long as he is discreet, she says nothing."

Harry shook his head again in disbelief then froze in horror. He could barely squeak out his question. "How old were your parents when they were arranged?"

With a bleak, knowing expression, Daphne said, "Sixteen."

The horror on Harry's face resolved itself into an expression that Hermione would have recognized in a flash, but Daphne just looked at him questioningly.

With his smile that made her weak in the knees, he said, "Don't worry, I'm Ok."

She nodded and pulled her shoes off before walking down the dock. Sitting down, she dangled her feet in the cool lake water on what was becoming a warm morning and promising to be a hot day.

He watched her for a few moments, staring at her with an intensity that would be daunting for many. She caught his eye and merely returned the look, measure for measure. After a full minute of gazing at each other Harry joined her, drifting his toes through the cool lake

water.

.oOo.

They were up at the house after lunch working on their reading, Harry continuing with Charms and Daphne with Transfiguration, when Hedwig flew in the open French doors to the porch with Tracey's response.

Daphne stroked Hedwig a few times before removing the letter. "She is the most beautiful and smart owl I've ever seen" she said, breaking the blue wax seal on her letter.

Sitting down on the couch, Harry watched her expression to try and divine the contents of the letter. Overall, he figured the letter was good with two embarrassing comments, an exasperating one and one frustrating.

"Soooo"

"She says her great Uncle Duncan is on the Continent until the end of next week, but doesn't see a problem with tuition. It's a bit of a hobby with him and he enjoys it."

Nodding his head he said, "What else is going on with your best friend?"

"Second best friend" she whispered as she looked down at the letter in her hands. His insides warmed as he caught the snippet.

"Er, She wants me to come over tomorrow for lunch and 'talk'; she's dying to know the identity of my mystery 'lover' as she says it" her face reddening a touch.

Harry chuckled and smiled, "Go, have fun. I've a few errands that I need to run, and I'll see if I can track down Sirius' solicitor as well.

Will you be home for dinner?"

She smiled at the question. Home. "Yes."

After a moment, she said, "I'm glad we got your Head of House paperwork in and registered – the ministry doesn't approve it per se – before you contact Hogwarts. Just in case they do go running to Dumbledore and he tries to gum up the works."

Harry nodded in concurrence and then said, "I've been thinking. It's great that Matty is taking such good care of us, but I think we should get some help of our own. I know an elf; he's a bit – different – but would die for me. Would you be Ok if I brought him on?"

She shrugged, a bit confused by the question. An elf was an elf. "Sure."

"Dobby!"

A long moment later, a pop announced the arrival of Harry's new domestic. He had his usual array of hats and socks at which Daphne goggled. He was bouncing on the balls of his feet at approximately a 10 Hz rate that was threatening to give both Harry and Daphne a headache.

"HARRY POTTER SIR! YOU IS CALLING DOBBY!" the elf screamed.

Shaking his head at the volume, Harry said, "Dobby, you don't have to shout."

Dobby reached into his floppy ears and pulled out bunches of cotton wool saying, "Dobby is very sorry Harry Potter sir, Dobby was working in the laundry at Hogwarts and the magical steam presses can be loud sir." This was all delivered with the most contrite and emotional expression that Daphne had ever seen on an elf. 'Different'

wasn't even going to be close to describing this little helper.

Harry explained that he had three homes that needed an elf and before he could finish the statement, Dobby fainted.

"What did you do to him?" Daphne asked in amusement.

"I think I broke him. Could you?"

After a quick Enervate from the dark haired young woman, Dobby accepted employment with the Ancient and Noble House of Potter, sobbing in joy the entire time.

"Dobby, this is Miss Greengrass, you will obey her as you would the mistress of the house, understand?"

Dobby smiled widely, "Yes, Master Harry. Dobby understands."

Daphne jumped in, "Dobby, come see me later and we can decide what uniform you should wear as befitting the servant of the Lord Potter."

Dobby bowed low, "Yes, Mistress. Dobby will go shopping now and be getting some food for dinner. Does Mistress have a menu for the week?"

Harry's eyes opened widely, part in amusement and part in surprise. Of course Dobby would understand this world, having worked for the Malfoys. Daphne sliding into the role of mistress of the house without missing a beat merely solidified his idea from earlier. As the two discussed the menu and other items, Harry just leaned back, enjoying the scene.

After a few minutes of discussion, Daphne turned to Harry and said, "Do you have any favorites to pick up?"



"Treacle tart"

She made a face and sighed. "Add treacle tart, Dobby."

A smiling Dobby said, "Yes, Mistress."

"Before you go Dobby, can you get to the other properties on your own?"

Shaking his head solemnly the elf said, "No, Master Harry. If you go to the house and call for Dobby, though, Dobby can come. Then, Dobby can go there any time."

Nodding Harry said, "We'll do Rowan Hill tomorrow and" he turned to Daphne with his eyebrows cocked "France next week?"

She nodded without showing any emotion, but when Dobby popped out a few moments later, she walked over to him, took his hand in hers and said, "Let's go upstairs for a bit."

The look in her smoldering eyes left little doubt in Harry's mind what was in store.

.oOo.

An hour later, he collapsed on the bed, sweating and panting for breath. He was wrong in one sense, they hadn't made love, but they had done almost everything else.

"You are incredible" he heard from his left as she curled her naked lithe form to his.

"So are you. I almost passed out a few times."

She chuckled softly and then was quiet for a while. "Do you feel like we're kids playing house until the adults come home?"

He turned on his side to face her and brushed some of the loose raven strands of hair out of her face. "Not really, no. This is my home now. I have access to more money than I'd ever dreamed and next year will double that. You're teaching me about my place in our society, and we're doing what we can to get ready for Voldemort. Most importantly, I have you."

"My life is going so well I'm afraid it's going to explode soon."

She had a shudder or two and said, "You've paid for your happiness in advance, love."

After a moment of rubbing her hand up and down his arm, she said, "I keep waiting for my Father or Mother to come snap me up and make me go with them, never to see you again. I have this whole other life that I feel is waiting for me. It's just waiting to snatch me up and say 'HA HA, all done with Potter'."

He kissed her brow and pulled her close.

"I like being mistress of a Potter home."

He smiled broadly. "Watching you and Dobby made my insides all warm. It felt right and good." He kissed her deeply, stoking their fires a bit. After a few moments, he pulled away and looked her in the eyes.

"I love you Daphne."

"I love you Harry."

.oOo.

After an excellent Dobby cooked dinner, they continued their reading. By now, Harry was half through the Standard Book of Spells, Grade 6.

Threat of death, torture and dismemberment are wonderful motivators in one's studies.

There was a knock on the door and there stood Terrence McKee, quite dirty but with a smile on his broad Irish face. "We're done, sir."

Harry smiled and motioned the man inside, "Well done. What do you have for me?"

McKee handed over the key book, which allowed a person to be added to pass the wards. He explained about the 'active defense' wards and how they could be temporarily turned off if they were going to have a party or whatnot.

"All this is in the front of your key book, sir. I just wanted to run through it with you all."

Nodding, Harry said, "Excellent" and headed over to the writing desk and pulling out a sack of galleons. "As we agreed. Tell your men, 'good work' from me."

McKee knuckled his forehead, "Thank you very much, sir. Remember Phalanx if you ever have need of wards, upgrades or home defense."

Harry clapped the man on the back and walked him out. A minute later he came back, finding Daphne reading the instructions in the key book. He plopped down next to her and exhaled noisily.

"Feel good to have the best wards on the planet up around the house?"

He smiled at her. "I finally feel safe."

"Good, now add Mum so she doesn't have a heart attack when the wards go active and dump her in the lake next time she tries to

apparate over. Oh, and Uncle George, too."

Nodding, he picked up the blood quill and wrote the two names in the book. There was the familiar scratching feeling on the back of his hand with which he'd become intimately familiar due to Dolores Umbridge.

Daphne had become unhinged when she noticed the scarring on the back of his hand and he'd had to tackle her to keep her from using the Floo to find the toad and decapitate her.

The fact that Daphne was naked at the time never even occurred to her.

Now, the scratching feeling on the back of his hand was a reassuring feeling. He hoped that over time he'd come to associate the feeling with the wards and therefore safety. One could always hope.

.oOo.

A soft fluttering noise got Harry's attention and he looked up from his reading. Pigwidgeon was flitting here and there in his usual spastic flying.

Instead of chasing down the strange post owl, Harry lifted his wand and summoned the bird to him. With a strangled "Awwk" Pig zoomed into Harry's hand.

Daphne walked in as Harry was reading the letter. She sat down next to him and said, "Bad?"

He merely handed her the letter and she read. "So, Weasley is still an insensitive prick, Dumbledore was monitoring the wards around your relative's house and knew when they fell, this whole 'Order' is losing their collective minds looking for you and he's worried that Granger may be writing to Viktor Krum?"

Harry explained about the Order of the Phoenix and Ron's jealousy about Hermione's date with Krum. "I wish he'd just leave off it. They went on one date, Hermione had a great time and Ron had to spoil it at the end and then badger her every time she's out of his sight about it. She and Viktor write to each other and I bet Hermione does it because Viktor lives in such a different world than she does. That's it, but he's mister super-prat about it." Harry shook his head in a combination of frustration and anger.

Ron had also asked Harry how much money he had inherited from Sirius. Daphne was exercising quite a bit of her extensive self control to keep from excoriating the red-headed fool that Harry sometimes called his best mate.

Trying to divert herself from her anger, she said, "Do you want to send a note to Dumbledore that you're safe?"

Harry didn't look at her but in a tone that could have frozen ice, he said, "He left me at the Dursleys. He knew it would be bad. Fuck him."

"What about idiot boy?"

He stood and went to the window. Looking out into the darkness he said, "I'll write him tomorrow. His jealousy is becoming very...tiresome." After a few more minutes he turned to her and said, "I'm going for a short walk, I'll be back soon."

Daphne sat there, thinking furiously and when Harry returned five minutes later, she said, "Come sit with me, we need to talk about a few things."

When they were sufficiently cuddled on the couch, she said, "Weasley is not going to take us being together very well, is he?"

He shook his head slowly, "No, that's what I was thinking about on my walk. He'll make me chose between him and you. I choose you."

Daphne's heart melted at that. She could only squeeze him in the half hug they were cuddled in before saying, "What about Granger?"

Harry was quiet a bit and then said, "I think Hermione will be Ok. On some things she can be very open-minded. She's repeatedly had a go at me and Ron about blasting all Slytherins, so that shouldn't be a problem. You're studious so that should also help."

She nodded. His opinions matched her conclusions. "School will be difficult too. Will the Gryffindors give you a hard time about dating a Slytherin?"

He smiled, "No. First, it's me. I've beaten Slytherin enough times in Quidditch to prove my loyalty." She playfully scowled and poked him in the ribs while he laughed. "Seriously, no one said 'boo' when Higgs and Stevens were dating last year. Now, if they give me a hard time as a carry over from last year, who knows."

He looked her straight in the face, "I don't care."

After a moment, a realization came to Harry and he said, "They are really going to give it to you, aren't they?"

She nodded. "Will they try and hurt you?"

She shrugged and with some heat, Harry said, "This is important. Are they going to try and hurt you?"

She looked him in the eye and her expression was something he hadn't seen there before. "There will be attempts by some of the stupid few and they will be dealt with. Love, how do you think Tracey and I kept from being ridden like brooms?"

It was his turn to shrug and she said, "I've been warding my bed ever since first year and the only time I don't have my wand in my hand while in the Slytherin Dorm is when I'm in the shower and then it's on the soap dish. Tracey and I have had to deal with Malfoy, Nott, Montague and some of the other twits. Nott in especial knows not to fuck with me. Zabini is the only decent male in our year and Tracey has been dating him for a year. I can take care of myself" she finished with a frosty smile.

"Fair enough. For now. We can talk about things as we get closer to the school year." He yawned, "Let's go bed."

.oOo.

Harry woke up in the middle of the night with Daphne's slim hands caressing him. He let out a long sigh of pleasure and heard her low voice.

"Harry, I need you."

She kissed his chest, moving up his neck and biting playfully. Straddling him, she took off her pajama top and his breath froze in his chest. The moonlight came in the window just right to illuminate her and she glowed in the soft white light. She was so beautiful.

"I love you. Make me yours."

He rolled her onto her back and for the first of many times in their lives to come, shared himself with the woman he loved.

.oOo.

04 July 1996

Daphne woke up and her clothes were cast in different corners of the room and smiled widely. I don't think I'll ever wear pajamas to bed

ever again.

Harry was spooned up behind her and had his right arm curled up and holding her while his hand was cupping her left breast. She'd never felt so loved and protected in her life.

Their first time had been disjointed, uncoordinated and somewhat painful. Before waking Harry, she'd cast the Contraceptive charm on herself and a specially designed numbing charm to ease the throes of her loss of maidenhood. It had worked somewhat.

The second time they'd made love, he'd been a demon and it made her smile widen even more. She seriously thought about assaulting him again, but the pressure in her bladder and the lingering soreness between her legs negated that. Maybe a long hot bath.

After she quietly bathed and dressed, she slipped downstairs, letting Harry sleep in. He had a hard night. Smiling like the cat that had the canary, she followed the odors of Dobby's cooking to the breakfast room.

Just as she finished the Prophet and her second cup of coffee, Harry strolled into the breakfast room whistling a tune and wearing his best Head of House robes, the gold thread winking in the sunlight. He whistled much better than he sang.

"Good morning, love"

He kissed the top of her head and sat down next to her. Squeezing her hand, he gave her a smile and said, "I love you. Last night was brilliant."

She gave out a small breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. Her heart had been telling her that making love with Harry had been the right thing to do, but some fear bubbled to the surface and had been screaming at her for the last ten minutes.



He'll leave you now. He got what he wanted and you'll be out on your ass.

His reassurance was the balm to this unknown wound. "It was wonderful, wasn't it?" She leaned forward and whispered in his ear, "You were magnificent."

His face reddened a bit and he shot her a cheeky grin. "Play your cards right, we'll get more of the same."

She laughed with him and he dug into his breakfast while she set the paper on the table and refilled her coffee mug.

He indicated the folded newspaper and asked, "Anything of note?"

Sipping her coffee she said, "More Fudge bashing. They are treating him like they treated you last year. Can't do anything right. Idiot. Get him out now. Need someone new."

"There was an article about some muggle hunting that had taken place in Shropshire of all places. Nothing about you." She got a big smile and said, "Puddlemere trounced the Tornados."

"And Chudley got their asses handed to them" Harry finished with a laugh. "When are you off to Tracey's?"

She looked at her watch and said, "I'll leave in about fifteen minutes. That way when I leave her place at four, she can't complain as we'll have the whole day together."

Harry swallowed and nodded his understanding. He paused and then said, "Don't take this the wrong way; I'm not getting all controlling. This is about security."

She frowned at his seriousness and said, "Go on."

"I'm not planning on going anywhere without you or without telling you where I'll be, who I'll be with and when I get back. From what we talked about the other day, I think you should do the same. That way, I can come rescue you if need be" he finished with a smile.

When she just looked at him with a neutral expression, he quickly said, "For example, today I'll be in the Alley at Gringotts and Flourish & Blotts with possibly one side trip if my research pans out."

Distracted, she said, "What research?"

"If it pans out, I'll tell you all about it tonight."

She nodded and said, "Ok. I see your point. I don't like feeling like you're my minder, but I understand security. I'll be home by four."

Harry seemed to deflate and then smiled in relief.

Fifteen minutes later, she called out "Davis Hall!" and the Floo whirled her away. She knew Harry was right behind her to go to Gringotts; she was looking forward to seeing him again. She already missed him. I have become such a sap.

She gracefully exited the Floo in the marbled entry hall of Davis Hall, where the head of the Noble House of Davis lived. Tracey was sitting on a chair reading a book across from the fireplace.

Popping up from her chair the energetic blond said, "Hey there girl, I was beginning to wonder if I was going to see you or hear from you at all this summer." Linking their arms together, Tracey purred, "Now tell me all about this stud you have corralled."

"Let's go to your room."

After Tracey closed the door, Daphne pointed to the ward stones in

the wall. Tracey's eyes widened and she activated the privacy ward for the room. "So, do tell" she said when she was done.

"I love Harry Potter."

Tracey's reaction to Daphne's declaration was wide eyes, followed by cackling laughter and finished with a slight scream of "Tell me all!"

Daphne gave a brief overview of her meeting up with Harry. "He was hurt so badly Tracey." She looked into the stricken eyes of her friend, "He almost died a couple of times on us."

"He was such a gentleman and we can talk so easily. Sorry girlfriend, he's my best friend now" to which Tracey gave a dramatic flounce and huff, all mitigated by her big smile.

"I'm so glad for you Daphne. Is he as noble as his press?"

"More so. I stopped him when we almost made love and his first response was to apologize. I had jumped him and he was apologizing." Tracey gave a soft sigh and she hugged her best friend.

With a wicked smile, Daphne went for full shock and said, "When we did make love he was incredible." Now Tracey's eyes went wide.

"Tell me all."

They talked all day in Tracey's rooms. She first vocalized that she wanted to be Mrs. Harry Potter and bear his children. It shocked her to say it out loud, but then she giggled with the good feelings that bubbled up from deep inside her at this admission. She told none of her lover's secrets, only her own.

Tracey was very supportive of their relationship and promised to bring Blaise up to speed and secure his support as well. "Harry already asked if our relationship would mean trouble in the dungeons.

He knew it would and is very worried about it. I told him I can take care of myself and he let it drop, but I can tell he's still worried."

"And you are worried. Or at least you should be."

Daphne nodded and bit her lip. "He'll kill anyone who hurts me. Anyone. On one level it feels good, but I sure as hell don't want him in Azkaban."

Tracey nodded. "Let me and Blaise puzzle at it for a bit. What about Mum, can we tell her?"

After a moments consideration, Daphne said, "Ok, your Mum only."

They found Belinda Davis in her study going over some reports from the charity she ran for aged and infirm witches and wizards. After a long discussion between the three witches, Belinda gave Daphne a warm farewell hug and said in her ear, "Congratulations on finding him, can we come to the wedding?"

With a laugh and a little blush, Daphne said, "Of course."

She used the Floo to return home a little early and was disappointed that Harry wasn't in the parlor. "Dobby" she called.

With a pop the elf appeared, bowed low and said, "Yes, Mistress?"

"Has Lord Potter returned yet?"

"Yes, Mistress. He is being down by the lake. He was most happy when he returned home."

Ten minutes later she was at the lakeside and found him sitting on the bench, watching the water. He was playing with a rolled up parchment. Oh, I hope Weasley didn't send another stupid letter.

She walked over and sat next to him. Giving him a warm kiss, she said, "I missed you today. I had fun with Tracey – she approves of you by the way – but I missed you."

He gave a nervous smile and she said, "How was your day?"

He ran his free hand through his hair and said, "Well, I found Sirius' solicitor and I am Lord Black, as well as, the financial inheritance. There was a stone of paperwork to sign, but that was pretty easy.

"I found the book I was looking for at the bookstore and confirmed what I was looking for so I made that side trip I mentioned."

Her brow crinkled and he said, "I saw your Father."

Her look of shock was very real. That was the last thing she expected. She expected Voldemort before her Father.

Harry waved the parchment and said, "This is a signed marriage contract between the Ancient and Noble House of Potter and Clan Greengrass."

For a full ten seconds she didn't move. When later remembering the day, she wasn't even sure if she'd been breathing.

"Daph, are you Ok?"

She roused and looked at him with a glint in her eye. "Did you think that you might talk to me about this before approaching my Father?"

Now Harry was stunned. He expected one of a few things and anger wasn't on the list. Joy, rejection, pleas for waiting but not anger.

"Er, I er. Well, I..."

"Harry Potter, I love you, but I will not have a marriage like my

parents. We will be partners and part of being partners means that we talk about things. You do not just run off and sign a marriage contract with my Father without consulting with me."

Harry's face fell. It was like the day Sirius died all over again.

"I'm sorry. I'll go to your Father and cancel it..." he started to say before she kissed him with abandon and began to pull at his clothes.

"Ok. We've had our first fight; partners Harry. Don't do it again. Now husband, make love to me" and she pulled Harry's robes over his head.

.oOo.

An hour later, they lay on his robes with hers pulled over them to keep them warm.

"Did you know that when you signed the contract we were legally married?"

He nodded, "That's one of the things I had to look up."

"How did it go with my Father?"

"A lot easier than I expected. Of course, I didn't mention that we'd been sharing a bed this last week or that I'd deflowered you the night before." She laughed and smacked him for that comment.

Harry strode into the study at Greengrass House and looked around a bit imperiously.

Cyrus Greengrass immediately recognized his visitor and also the robes the visitor was wearing. It was the first time one of the Fifteen had been in his house.

"My Lord, how can I be of service to you today?"

Adopting the gruff attitude his Uncle Vernon used to great effect to cover up his incredible nervousness, Harry said "A seat would be nice."

When Greengrass waved him to a chair, Harry decided to brass his way through it and said, "Greengrass, I don't have a lot of time to waste, so I'll get to the point. Your daughter Daphne, I'd like to make an offer for her."

"Today."

Cyrus then became all smiles. Tying his family to one of the Fifteen! What an opportunity!

Harry resisted the urge to wipe his hands on his robes, the smarminess oozing in waves off Cyrus Greengrass made Harry want to wash.

There was a token back and forth and the bride price was a mere twenty five thousand galleons and the dowry to be determined in one year's time. Ten minutes after Harry had arrived; he used the Floo to leave.

"Ten minutes. It only took you ten minutes?"

"I wore the fancy Head of House robes for a reason."

"This is what you decided the other day. When you asked how old my parents were when they were arranged."

He nodded and his voice choked with emotion he said, "I need you Daph. I couldn't lose you because I didn't act."

She kissed him again, rolled on top of him and reached for her wand.

"I'm so glad."

Later, as they walked up the trail to the house arm in arm, Daphne stopped and stared ahead at nothing.

"What, are you Ok?"

"I'm Daphne Potter."

"No."

She looked at him, confused.

"You're Countess Daphne Potter, Viscountess Black."

It started with a giggle and ended up with Daphne rolling on the ground in laughter. Harry had a big smile on his face as he sat on a stump and watched her roll around.

As he helped her up he said, "Come on, wife. Let's go eat dinner. Invite your mother and siblings over. I'd like to have a family meal."

A/N

1. I own nothing, thanks to all reviewers, even those that are crass and crude. It makes me feel good that you made the effort to review my little scribblings.

2. The Fifteen families are: [Active] Potter, Black, Bones, Longbottom, Boot, MacMillan, Jones, Abbott. [Family line extinct] Stuart, Desimone, Bartram, Shute, Carniol, Watkins, Waterman. Yes, there is a reason that the 15 are primarily light-sided families and the darker families are not included (with the exception of the Blacks). To be explained in future chappies.

3. I stole the warding line from Viridian. It's a great line, gotta love it.



The idea of the ward stones drawing on the Earth's natural magic is his as well. Fantastic idea and has to provide more power than any other source than I can imagine.

4. Hertz (Hz) is a unit of measurement of frequency. Not the rental car company.

5. Again, intentional whirlwind romance; don't want to hear "He'd never do that," or "She's a Slytherin". As I responded to one of the more intelligent reviews, I was going for the "Florence Nightingale meets the Stockholm Syndrome yet it turns out to be the right thing in the end" thing. The problem is that would be far too long a name for the story, hence, Partners.

6. I'm most of the way through ch3, but not done. Expect slower updates from here on out. I wanted to get ~20K words into the story to see if it would 'stick' and it has so here we go...

md

## Chapter 3

04 July 1996 (cont'd)

"Married?"

Evelyn had used the Floo to bring 13 year old Astoria and 9 year old Phillip to the Potters' for dinner. After a quick hug and peck on the cheek, a beaming Daphne had escorted her mother to the parlor so she could give the good news whilst her mother sat. It was poor form to impart important information such as this while the receiver was standing.

Harry held his breath. He knew that his now Father-in-law had accepted him merely because he was the head of an Ancient and Noble House. However, Evelyn was not so shallow.

When Harry was five years old he'd brought home a test from Mrs. Holloway's first grade maths class. He'd scored 100% on the test and Mrs. Holloway had put a gold star at the top and hand written "Well Done!" She'd even underlined the "Well Done!" Harry had been bursting with joy and almost sprinted to Number 4 to show his Aunt his outstanding score.

Unfortunately, this was one of the many days that "Poor Dudders" was "being picked on and slandered" by those "bitches and dykes" at "that school". Whenever Dudley was sent home early from school for his misbehavior, usually beating up another student, all the inhabitants of Number 4 Privet Drive were treated to the same rant by Vernon. Harry knew it by heart by the time he was seven.

Harry sprinted in the door to the kitchen, not noticing the bulk of his oversized cousin sitting in front of the television in the lounge with a double hot fudge sundae. He'd run up to his Aunt and before she could say a word, he'd held up his test and said, "Look Aunt Petunia, I got a gold star!"

He got the second worst beating of his life that day. Dudley had been sent home because he'd actually had the temerity to throw a punch at Mrs. Holloway when she'd pulled him aside to discuss his score of 37% on his test. She'd been concerned and wanted to ask if Dudley needed extra tuition.

Aunt Petunia had screamed, "IT'S YOUR FAULT" and started in on him; first with the cooking spoon, and when it broke, the rolling pin. People joke about getting hit by a rolling pin, but it broke Harry's arm that day.

It also broke any desire in him to be accepted by his "family" ever again.

Until this evening. He loved Daphne and wanted to get along with his mother-in-law. He wanted Evelyn to like him because he liked her. He wanted her to like him because that was what Daphne wanted. It was confusing, but made sense to him. Harry and Daphne had talked long about this and other related topics. As Daphne turned to hold his hand, she gave him a smile of reassurance.

"Yes, Evelyn. Married." he said. He gave a brief description of his discussion with Cyrus Greengrass to which Daphne's mother gave a slight nod at the end.

"Mother, what are your thoughts?" Daphne asked with a touch of worry and a touch of impatience.

With a distracted air, Evelyn shook her head and said, "Thoughts? My thoughts are that my eldest is a married woman now and I feel very much older than I did yesterday." She finished with a smile and said, "But as I told you the other day" here she looked at Harry, "I very much approve of your choice."

Harry exhaled, smiled and leaned back on the loveseat he was

sharing with Daphne.

"Married?" piped up Astoria. The slim brunette could have passed for a younger twin of her sister, except for the disbelieving expression on her face.

Daphne looked her sister in the eye, staring her sister down in a very short while. Astoria looked to her lap and said, "I'm sorry for my outburst, it just caught me off guard." She stood and approached her sister, kissing her on the cheek and said, "Congratulations, sister."

Turning to Harry, Astoria had a shy smile and kissed him on the cheek as well, saying, "Congratulations, brother."

Deciding to be daring, Harry pulled his new sister into a soft hug to which she at first stiffened and then hugged him back. Right before they broke, Astoria whispered in his ear, "Take care of her."

Harry nodded to her and saw Phillip kissing Daphne and then turned to Harry. With an expression of seriousness on his cherubic face that was so out of place as to be amusing, Phillip extended his hand and said, "Congratulations, brother."

Harry shook the overly serious young boy's hand, showing Phillip the respect that he so obviously wanted and said, "Thank you, brother."

Evelyn got a small smile and said, "So, do you still want to have a ceremony?" This question occupied her and her daughters for the next half hour while Harry sat there performing his duties as a husband. Saying "Yes, dear" whenever prompted and always 'going with the flow' as they say. Most husbands in their thirties and forties say "Yes, dear" because of a touch of cynicism about the realistic understanding that Mother gets what Mother wants combined with genuine affection and love for their spouse.. Harry just wanted Daphne to be happy and was willing to go along with the discussion if that made her happy. However, even he had his limits and after ten

minutes or so, he looked at Phillip, rolled his eyes and motioned the young boy to follow him.

They went out on the porch and Harry said, "Do you like Quidditch?" Phillip looked at Harry as if he were daft and they found a common ground to begin getting to know each other.

After ten minutes or so with Harry diagramming out some of his more notable victories using pine cones and rocks on the floor of the porch, Phillip said in a small voice, "Daphne said you're the best Seeker at Hogwarts."

"Did she really?"

Phillip nodded his head, paused and then said, "Do you think you could teach me how to be a Seeker?"

This really surprised Harry and he said, "We are going to be moving to the main house soon and we have a pitch on the grounds. Do you have your own broom?"

"You have your own pitch?" Phillip asked in an awed tone. When Harry smiled and nodded, the boy said, "Yes, I have a Comet 260. It's not that fast, but I'm learning quite a bit on it."

"Good broom to learn on."

"I bet you have a Firebolt." Harry nodded and Phillip said, "Wow." At this point, Dobby popped in, announcing dinner.

Dinner was a rousing success. Daphne was teased by Astoria regarding her now matronly status and the laughing and good humor was felt by all. Harry wondered if there would be so much smiling had Cyrus Greengrass been present. Harry had not forgotten his Father-in-Law's liberal use of the Torqueo Curse.

.oOo.

05 July 1996

Daphne woke, no clothes scattered throughout the bedroom because they'd gone to bed au natural. Actually, Harry had carried her to bed and made love to her for two hours before they passed out with their bodies intertwined.

Her husband was currently snuggled up behind her with his legs over hers. She half rolled over to get a better view of him and felt her heart skip a beat. How did I fall in love so hard, so fast?

She reached out and stroked his face with her left hand, waking him slowly. As he blinked, her blue eyes brightened further when she saw the happiness in his emerald green eyes.

"We're going to have beautiful children."

He smiled, "So long as they look like their mother."

"Flatterer. Obviously, we have quite a bit on our plate before now and then, but I assume you do want to have children."

He nodded, "When Voldemort is dead, we can start to work on that but, yes, I'd like to have children with you."

"How many?"

"Not sure. More than one. What do you want? You have to birth them."

She chuckled softly, "True. I've always thought that three was a good number."

He nodded and grabbed his wand. Two quick Breath Freshening

charms and a Contraceptive charm later he said, "Come to me wife."

.oOo.

After breakfast they went into the study, Harry to start writing letters to Ron, McGonagall, Flitwick and Lupin; Daphne to Tracey.

"We need to go to Gringotts today" he said.

She cocked an eyebrow at him before she said, "Vaults, right. Before lunch?"

He nodded back and handed her a draft he had addressed to McGonagall.

She sat back to read while he started writing to Ron. She corrected one grammatical error and handed it back saying, "You might want to sign it 'Lord Potter' versus 'Harry'."

"Why? I'd think that they'd want to help me and by signing it as 'Lord Potter' I'd be distancing myself from them."

Daphne shook her head and said, "You need them as peers and allies. You need confidential instruction and as 'Lord Potter' you can approach them for these things. 'Harry Potter' is still an ickle Firstie in their minds eye. How about you sign it, 'Harry Potter, ninth Earl Potter'? It will also be a sign to all and sundry that you have accepted your inheritance and place in society."

Harry nodded at the logic and the compromise and signed the letter. He rewrote the same thing, but addressed the second to Flitwick. They settled on a muggle tea room that Harry knew in Surrey and invited Remus to meet them the next day. The professors were invited to tea this afternoon. Shortly, Hedwig and Diomedé winged away with their burdens.

As Daphne gathered up her bag, Harry said, "I really need to learn to apparate."

"I'll teach you this afternoon, it isn't that hard."

He used the Floo first and strode out, wand in hand and eyes searching. The bank was mostly empty and when Daphne stepped out of the fireplace a moment later, they went to Hornsplit to conduct some business. This time, the goblin recognized the voice speaking to him and looked up before giving a churlish response and things went easier. Thirty minutes later, Daphne was added to all the Potter and Black accounts and they had both made out wills.

With quite a bit of gold in their moneybags and a healthy stack of pound notes, they headed out to the Alley. "I want to drop these off at the solicitors" he said holding up the wills, "and then, wife of mine, I want to get us some rings."

She smiled, hooked her arm in his and said nothing, just walking down the alley on a drizzly morning.

.oOo.

The ring on Harry's left hand felt heavy and thick. It was a plain gold band with an auto sizing charm and an anti-scratch charm as well. He found that he kept playing with it. Rubbing it with his thumb, twirling it around his ring finger with his other fingers. It really made the whole idea of being married to Daphne much more real. He loved it.

He was also wearing a modest necklace that supported a small charm. While Daphne had been browsing the diamond case "Can't be rushed with this, love. Go look around" he'd found a solution to a problem.

There was a beautiful gold link bracelet and a matching men's



necklace. When one of the wearers was in danger, the other matching piece of jewelry heated up. One drop of blood for each of them and Harry's mind was more at ease. At least he'd know if she was in danger.

He rejoined her and they'd settled on a two and a half carat flawless diamond in a Tiffany setting to match the plain gold wedding bands they'd both wanted. Daphne teared up as Harry gently slid the rings on her finger. After gently kissing her hand, he embraced her and whispered in her ear, "I love you."

When paying, Harry lay down an extra stack of galleons saying, "I don't want this to be in the paper." The jeweler smiled ingratiatingly and pocketed the gold.

Daphne was exhilarated. The rings on her hand really brought home that she was Harry's and he was hers.

She'd always been an independent girl and never really relied on anyone other than her mother. She was perfectly friendly with Tracey and Blaise, but emotionally, she could have walked away from them and not looked back.

Not with Harry. She needed him like her body needed sustenance, sunshine and air. It scared her but at the same time, she'd never felt more alive in her life. Voldemort was a real problem and it was a tether to reality and kept her from becoming lost in the wonder and joy of being a newlywed. If not for that, she was sure she would drift away in happiness.

She'd read in her romantic novels (a vice she never admitted to anyone, not even her mother) about a spouse who exclaimed to their beloved, "I would die for you!"

Daphne felt that way. More importantly, she would kill for Harry. Anything. She would do anything to help them survive so they could

have those three children running around the garden at Rowan Hill, running down the beach at the Cote d'Azur and eventually taking the scarlet steam engine to Scotland.

He was her love, her future. She didn't think she wanted a future without him. She'd do anything. She knew that he'd do anything for her as well.

They had used the Floo to get home and she started to explain apparition while Dobby made lunch.

"So tell me again how you already know how to apparate and can do it without getting into trouble?"

She shook her head in mock disdain. "When you live in an all magical house, they can't trace who does the magic so most pureblood families tutor their children in the summer. My Mother felt it necessary for me to know how to apparate in order to remove myself from...unfortunate situations if necessary."

He nodded and then said, "How long?"

"Since the summer after third year."

Muttering, "Destination, Determination, Deliberation. Will myself to my destination." he twisted in place and to his astonishment, ended up on the center of the rug; his target.

Silence from Daphne made him turn around and with raised eyebrows, "Did I do it right?"

She just semi-glared at him, "Dammit Potter, how can you do it right the first time?"

He smiled the smile that made her weak in the knees and said, "Dunno, Potter, I must have a good teacher" and apparated right

behind her.

She "Eeep" –ed and his arms encircled her from behind, cupping her breasts. She ground back into him before a pop and Dobby's voice sounded, "Lunch is being ready, Master Harry, Mistress Daphne."

Harry turned her in his arms and they sunk to the couch, claiming each others lips and divesting themselves of clothes as they went. Lunch was eaten late that day.

.oOo.

Daphne was seated in a chair in the entry hall while Harry paced. "Why are you nervous, love?"

He rubbed the back of his neck and then ran his hand through his hair. "I'm afraid they won't take the letter seriously and not show. I'm also afraid that they will show and then laugh at me."

Daphne nodded, "Understandable. Let me tell you something, though. When you give them the overview of the prophecy, I think you'll get their attention quickly. You say McGonagall knows about most if not all your misadventures at school?"

He nodded and pulled her out of her chair and into his arms. He'd never liked personal contact. Until Daphne that is. She was like a drug that he couldn't get enough of. Making love with her, embracing her, holding hands with her, even sitting on the couch with their legs looped over the other while they read. His mind, body and soul all seemed to shriek out for more contact with this entrancing witch of his.

Calming under her touch, he said, "Ok, we've got the plan. I'll stick to the plan and we'll be Ok. Right?"

She nodded and rested her head on his chest. Two minutes later the

fireplace roared green with the activation of the Floo and Minerva McGonagall stepped out. A heartbeat later, the fireplace roared again and the diminutive form of Filius Flitwick appeared.

McGonagall's eyes widened slightly when she saw Daphne standing right next to Harry. She turned to Harry who said, "Professors, I'm very happy you could come. May I introduce my wife, Daphne Potter?"

The two professors' jaws dropped. McGonagall looked back and forth between the couple and then closed her mouth with a snap and said, "Congratulations."

Flitwick had also the rapid back and forth between the couple and then with a chuckle said the old wedding blessing, "I wish you joy and many children".

With murmured thanks, Daphne led the professors into the drawing room for tea and discussion. After everyone was settled and Daphne had poured for everyone, they all looked to Harry to start the discussion.

He took a deep breath and said, "Professors, everything I say today must be held in the deepest of confidence. Even from Professor Dumbledore."

Flitwick and McGonagall both frowned at that. Harry held up his hand and said, "Most of what I'm going to tell you was told to me by Professor Dumbledore. I have very good reasons to be leery of the Headmaster at this time, which I'll explain later.

"The main reason I've asked you here is I'd like to hire the both of you for private tuition in Transfiguration and Charms for Daphne and me."

Flitwick sat back in his chair, a confused look on his face. "Mr. Potter,

while you do not have extraordinary high grades as your wife does, I will tell no secrets when I say you scored an Outstanding in my course for your fifth year and an Outstanding on your Charms O.W.L.. Why do you want extra tuition when school starts in two months?" McGonagall nodded in concurrence.

"Professors, you both know of my many, shall we say, adventures at school?"

They both nodded, McGonagall with a wry expression and Flitwick openly smiling.

"After the encounter at the Department of Mysteries last month, Professor Dumbledore finally told me why Lord Voldemort attacked me as a baby and has continued to pursue me since."

The room was perfectly silent and Harry had the undivided attention of all present. His fear that the professors wouldn't take him seriously was proving unfounded as both Heads of House were focused on him without interrupting.

"Before I was born, a prophecy was made that stated that I would be able to kill Lord Voldemort. I won't go into the details of the wording, as only two people alive know it and it should probably stay that way, but that's why he keeps coming for me. I need to be better prepared. I need to be able to defend myself and my family. The prophesy says I'll be able to defeat him, but I need training."

With a smile, he addressed his Head of House and said, "I know you don't think much of prophesy and divination as a whole. I happen to agree with you. The problem is that Voldemort knows of the prophesy and he does believe in the power of fate. At this point, it doesn't matter what any one of us thinks about divination, Voldemort will keep coming."

There was a long moment of silence before Flitwick exhaled noisily.

"Have you discussed extra tuition with the Headmaster?"

Daphne saw Harry take a steadying breath before he said, "Professor, he was the one who heard the telling of the prophecy and knew that part of it was compromised to Lord Voldemort. He knew all this before I was born and he still insisted on a standard Hogwarts curriculum allowing me, in my ignorance, to take worthless subjects like Divination. He could have told me at any point; after First year and I encountered Voldemort over the Philosopher's Stone, Second Year after the Chamber of Secrets, Third Year with the Sirius Black Scare, Fourth Year with the Tournament and my forced participation followed by Voldemort's resurrection."

Daphne reached out and took his hand to calm him and distract him from his rant. He smiled at her and said, "I'm sorry professors, I don't mean to take out my frustrations on you for what Professor Dumbledore has done, or not done as the case may be. He claimed that he did it so that I could have a normal childhood. My childhood ended on November First of 1981. You can see why I don't trust the Headmaster to do what's in my best interest."

The always stoic Minerva McGonagall was gobsmacked and Filius Flitwick sat there with his jaw working up and down, but no sound coming out. With a tight smile, Daphne said, "Of course, we would prefer if the Headmaster was not informed of this conversation."

They both nodded and sat silently. After a moment, Flitwick pulled out his wand, flicked it and a muggle daily planner appeared on his lap. Pursing his lips, he looked through the calendar and said, "I have availability to work with you mornings most every day. I am going on holiday to see my grandchildren for a week at the beginning of August, but other than that, I am at your disposal."

McGonagall sat there for a moment and then said, "Mr. Potter, are you sure you don't want to work with the Headmaster in this situation? He is a very powerful wizard."

Harry was about to reply when he heard the Floo roar in the entry hall. Healer Stebbins stepped out of the Floo and entered the drawing room, looking for the Potters. At this point he paused seeing the two professors at tea with Harry and Daphne. "Lord Potter" he said formally, "if this is an inconvenient time, I can return later."

Harry saw the grave expression on the face of his normally cheerful Healer and said, "George, what's the news? Did you find what happened?"

Stebbins' eyes cut to the professors then back to Harry. With a wave of his hand, Harry said, "I trust Professors McGonagall and Flitwick. Please, speak freely."

He sighed and said, "Your convulsions were caused by the cessation of a power limiting ward acting on you. I assume when you left your Aunt and Uncle's home, the wards that were in place there fell and the power drain on you was cancelled immediately."

Flitwick gasped in horror and picked up the thread in an undertone of dread and disgust, "Those wards are usually used to contain powerful magical creatures like dragons or manticores. When used on persons, they can sap a person's magical core to bare minimum for survival and an abrupt removal of the ward can sometimes be lethal. But who would do that?"

"Albus" McGonagall whispered her face as white as chalk. "He's controlled the wards there since we left Harry there all those years ago." She turned her distraught face to Harry.

Without looking at anyone, Harry left the room and went out on the front porch. Daphne was furious. "Show them the list of his injuries" she hissed at Stebbins.

"Daphne, you know I need Harry's authorization to" She cut him off

with a raised hand.

"Uncle George, I'm his wife. Just do it."

Nodding, he handed McGonagall a parchment with a full listing of Harry's injuries. She held it so Flitwick could read it as well.

"His Uncle did that to him. Dumbledore left Harry with them and forced him to go back there year after year. That's what your Dumbledore did for my Harry. It wasn't the first time he was beaten, only the worst time."

A single tear escaped the right eye of the nationally renown emotionless Transfiguration Mistress while the Dueling Master, Charms Master and continually upbeat Filius Flitwick, ran from the room to be violently sick.

"Gods above and below" Minerva McGonagall prayed. The Transfiguration Mistress held in a sob, remembering an evening in Surrey that seemed like just yesterday.

.oOo.

After a few moments for everyone to regain their composure, McGonagall agreed to the tuition as well. She and Flitwick would be by Rowan Hill every day, Flitwick at 0900 and McGonagall at 1100 Monday through Friday. Both professors were heartened that the young couple was so far ahead in their sixth year studies.

"We won't, necessarily be sticking to the standard Hogwarts curricula though" said the now serious Charms Master. Glancing at his partner who nodded, he continued, "We shall be focusing on combat spells and the use of seemingly non-combat spells in a fighting environment."

Harry was still outside, composing himself, and Healer Stebbins had



followed him. Daphne said to the two professors "Is there a text that we should purchase to study from?"

Flitwick rubbed his chin and said to a still pale McGonagall, "McNulty?"

She pondered for a moment and said, "Yes, I think so."

Turning to Daphne, Flitwick said, "Advanced Magical Combat by George McNulty is the text we shall use. One thing before I leave you to tend to your husband; we will not be teaching you to duel, we will be teaching you to fight and survive. We will be teaching you to wound, maim and kill. I want you both to think about that. We shall meet you at Rowan Hill on Monday morning." The diminutive man hopped out of his chair and his tall counterpart silently rose with him.

Daphne walked them to the entry hall to use the Floo to leave when Flitwick snapped his fingers. "One more thing. You and your husband should probably start on a fitness regimen. Let's see..." he tapped his finger on his chin and said, "The Dueling Masters Training Guide will do well. It has training regimens for men and women and starts at the beginner level and works up." He bowed slightly and said, "Until Monday then" and hopped in the fireplace after calling out "Hogwarts, Charms Office!"

Minerva seemed to hesitate and then said in a low voice, "Mrs. Potter, I will say this to your husband on Monday as well, but I'd ask you to relay to him that I shall definitely keep his confidences and" here she paused collecting herself, "I shall not fail him again." McGonagall glanced at Daphne and the young woman was stunned to see the 'old battleaxe' had tears in her eyes.

Daphne gave the older woman a small smile and nodded before the Floo was used again, this time taking its rider to the Transfiguration Office at Hogwarts.

As soon as McGonagall's form twirled out of sight in the green flames, Daphne called out, "Dobby!"

With a pop the house elf appeared, but instead of his usual bubbly – borderline frenetic – personality, the fellow was in tears. "Yes Mistress?" he said in a low voice.

With real concern she said, "Dobby what's wrong?"

He looked up at her and said, "Master Harry is sad, so Dobby is sad."

Somewhat relieved, she asked "Dobby, where is Master Harry?"

"He is being at the folly."

Daphne turned and headed out the front door toward the small Grecian structure that in Victorian times was called a folly. Generally it was a place for people to congregate or just sit out of the sun and rain.

From a distance she saw Harry standing and leaning on the back of one of the chairs, George Stebbins sitting across from him. It looked like George was explaining something as he was waving his hands and indicating as if to emphasize a point.

She smoothly mounted the three steps and without pause took Harry in her arms. He was unresisting but almost non-responsive. After a moment or two, he hugged her back firmly, as if he were drawing strength and energy from the embrace. After a full minute, he pulled back, kissed her forehead and whispered to her, "Thanks"

"Anytime, Harry."

"George has been telling me about the short and long term affects of the ward. Long story short, there shouldn't be any long term affects. Short term, I'll get to a point in about a week where my magical core

will start to refill without the effect of the ward acting on me and instead of a trickle of magic regenerating, it will be like a dam bursting."

"Yes," George said. "Expect some accidental magic and aches and pains. If it gets worse than that, Floo for me and I'll come right over. You'll be at the main house?"

Daphne nodded and George said, "Right, then. I'm off. Take care then Harry, and Daphne, take good care of him. Congratulations and all that on the marriage." George was a little red faced at the last and headed off to the summer house at a fast walk.

She took his hand and they ambled down the trails, watching the sun go down. After ten minutes of silence, she filled him in on the balance of the conversation and the recommended texts. He gave a small smile at McGonagall's apology. Daphne said, "What is all that about?"

Harry glanced at her and said, "First year she didn't listen to me about the Stone being threatened, last year she told me to keep my head down regarding Umbridge and didn't want to talk about anything that might have been going on" he lifted his right hand at this point indicating the blood quill sessions, "and I suppose she's also referring to her involvement with me being left at the Dursleys. Hagrid told me that he took me from Godric's Hollow that Halloween night and took me to Surrey on Dumbledore's orders. Apparently McGonagall was there and was less than pleased about me being left there but apparently she bowed to Dumbledore's desires. Hagrid never got into specifics though."

Daphne's face closed up and Harry noticed. "What's up?" he asked. She debated saying anything. She was a bit upset at the revelations and finally couldn't hold it in.

"I had no idea that McGonagall had let you down so often. I was

completely wrong in saying she was trustworthy. I'm sorry."

Harry frowned a bit and said, "Why do you say you think she's untrustworthy?"

Daphne's face flushed and she waved her hand, "Look at her track record! When it mattered she let it slide. She didn't stand up to that idiot Dumbledore when she knew the Dursley's were for shit, she let you hang when you brought concerns about the super-secret Philosopher's Stone, and she let that fucking toad bitch torture you for a year!" By the end of her rant, Daphne was nearly shouting and panting hard.

Harry laid a calming hand on her shoulder and she noticeably calmed. She still seethed inside, but the volcano of emotions calmed quite a bit. Pulling his hand from her shoulder and putting it between her hands, she kissed his palm and said in a low voice, "I'll never forgive my Father for what he's done to me, and I won't forgive those that have hurt you: Voldemort, Dumbledore, Dursleys and now McGonagall."

Harry blinked at the list. He thought about it for a second and agreed that the first three on the list were correct, but it was a bit over the top for McGonagall to be on the list.

"Daph" he said, pulling her into a hug, "McGonagall has screwed up on more than one occasion, but it has never been from malice aforethought. Her mistakes were from fear of standing up to her boss and one of the most powerful wizards on the planet in a time of great confusion, an admittedly arrogant ignoring of an excitable firstie and the same in fifth year that was more of a mistake in judgment."

He paused, collecting his thoughts and Daphne relaxed a bit in his arms. "Voldemort, Dumbledore and the Dursleys all set out to hurt me. Intentionally. I don't see that motivation in McGonagall. I'm not saying that she is as pure as the driven snow, but I'm willing to give

her a chance, I'd like for you to as well."

They walked down to the lakefront and sat in the bench watching the sun set. As Daphne leaned into her husband, she thought about how serious the mood had become since the professors had come.

The only people she ever really was possessive or protective of were her siblings, but never like this. She wanted to hurt those who had hurt her man and it was a new feeling. The violence was new and not very welcome on the whole. The past week she had experienced one emotionally charged situation after the next and it was no wonder she wanted to react in an extreme way.

The possessiveness was also new, but not unwelcome. It made her smile on the inside as the thought reverberated in her consciousness: he's mine.

Recollecting herself, she asked "How are you feeling?"

"About the power limiting ward?" She nodded, "Well, I'm of two minds right now." He sighed and ran his hands through his hair, as if this would transfer energy to his tired brain. "Part of me, a very large part mind, wants to rant and rage and be furious at Dumbledore. I think I have that right."

She nodded and he continued, "But the other part of me is just baffled. Why would Dumbledore set this up? Did he want me to fail? George admitted that he isn't a ward expert but he did know that this ward worked in conjunction with the blood wards on the house. They still affected me at school. I'm confused why he would think this is a good idea."

Looking at her with plaintive, pain filled eyes, he said, "Did he want me to die?"

She shook her head, just as devoid of answers as her husband and

gathered him into her arms as they sat on their bench.

After the sun dipped below the horizon in the ancient dance it performed for the universe every day, they ambled up to the house and had a light meal. Dobby seemed to have sensed the moods of his master and mistress and fixed up a cold collation for them to pick at.

After dinner, Harry went back to his studies while Daphne wrote a letter to Flourish & Blotts for their new books. She came into the parlor to send off the letter with a big smile on her face.

Her grin was infectious and Harry smiled back asking, "What's so funny?"

She sent off Diomede and snuggled up next to Harry, playing with the buttons on his shirt. "I just signed my first letter as 'Daphne Potter'."

.oOo.

06 July 1996

As they finished up their breakfast, Harry playfully pulled Daphne out of her chair saying, "C'mon, we're going muggle today before we meet Remus."

Daphne had a quick flash of fear and then settled down. He'll take care of me. It was a new feeling for her. She'd only felt it for her Mother, but even then, Evelyn had been unable to protect her from Cyrus. She snorted at the idea of Cyrus trying to bully or run over Harry. My new Harry would destroy him.

He wore the basic black pants and white shirt that Matty had made for him while Daphne put on a summer dress that made Harry's jaw drop. She smiled as he shook his head a few times to clear it before he said, "We'll Floo to the Leaky Cauldron and then a hackney into

town."

Ten minutes later they were exiting their black cab and as Harry handed her out, he said with a flourish, "Welcome, my dear to Harrods." Daphne's eyes went wide and a wicked grin came over her as she grabbed her husband's hand and drug him toward the mammoth store.

"One thing, Daph, we only have two hours."

One hour, fifty three minutes and sixteen seconds later, Harry groaned as he held the door open for his wife. She smiled at him, "Thanks for being such a good sport" she said to him.

They'd run through the store purchasing exercise clothes, casual, semi-formal, formal and Harry had even been fitted for a Tuxedo while Daphne had purchased seven evening gowns. Her purse was bulging a bit with all the shrunken bags, and she took his hand and they walked to the taxi stand for a lift to a sporting goods store. Harry wanted to purchase an exercise machine to go along with the clothes.

She looked at the new Vacheron Constantin watch Harry had purchased for her. It was breathtakingly gorgeous and when he'd put it on her wrist she'd glanced at the form he'd signed for payment. "Love, how many Galleons is seventeen thousand pounds?" she'd whispered.

After a moments thought he said, "Around thirty five hundred Galleons." She'd almost fell over in shock, but instead kissed him and dragged him into a changing room for a few minutes. When the changing room monitor had cleared her throat for the fifth time, they'd emerged, a little ruffled, but with big smiles.

He took her to McDonald's and she'd eaten all of his fries as well as, her own. The hamburger she had one bite of and tactfully returned it

to its little box and closed it.

They had the time, so they took the train to Surrey, cuddling in their compartment. As it was just after lunch, they weren't disturbed as they chatted about life, deepening and broadening their understanding of each other.

She'd been a bit awestruck at how lucky she had been. She and Harry just fit together. Daphne wanted to be a better person for him. Not because she craved his approval, although she was terrified of disappointing him. She had almost fallen off her seat when he told her that he felt that he wasn't good enough for her, but that he'd do his best to be a good enough man and husband to her.

"You are such a good person, love, I don't feel worthy of you" she said in an undertone, He just smiled and shook his head. The train kept rumbling down the rails.

.oOo.

"So tell me more about the Fifteen."

She leaned back on him and said, "Well, right now at Hogwarts there are two other Heads of Ancient and Noble Houses. Longbottom and Bones."

"Susan? Really? A woman as Head of House?"

She smacked him playfully, "Yes, you sexist pig." She laughed at his stammered apologies, "Since Susan's father was the Head of House before he was killed and she's his only child, she will be Head of House until a son of hers reaches majority."

"That's pretty medieval."

"Well, they are Ancient and Noble houses for a reason."



She tapped her fingernails thinking, "Hannah Abbot is second cousin to the Head of House for the Abbotts, Terry Boot's great Uncle is Head of the House of Boot." She stopped thinking and tapped her fingers as if counting and then said, "Oh, MacMillan. His Uncle is Head of his House."

She sat up and said "It's good to make these connections. Abbott, Boot and MacMillan aren't the Heads of their House but they are connexions to the other Heads of the Fifteen. It's good to be socially connected with them, as well as, politically."

Harry nodded, trying to take all this in. He'd told Daphne that he thought this political sphere was worthless and she'd hotly responded, "If you can prevent one person dying because of your action as one of the Fifteen, will you do it?"

The question's answer was obvious, so he listened and learned the best he could.

"Now" she continued, "since you are Black and Potter, the others in the Fifteen are going to flock to you soon to try and align you with their goals." She'd also explained that the Fifteen had significant control in the Wizengamot. "If half of the active Fifteen exercise their prerogative and vote en masse, they can veto or bury any vote, bar election, in the Wizengamot. You have two of the active eight votes."

"If the Fifteen are so powerful and influential, why haven't they cleaned up things before now?"

Daphne sat there nonplussed. After a few moments she dropped her hands and said, "I don't know."

He nodded and leaned back, pulling her into his arms. It was actually quite scary to him. It seemed like so much responsibility but he had neither preparation nor knowledge to step into this role and be

successful.

"Longbottom and Bones, you get along with them pretty well, right?"

Harry nodded, "Yeah, Neville is a friend and Susan was in the DA last year."

Daphne nodded, "Good, you three can form a power base that will dominate Wizarding society for the next hundred years."

Harry's eyes widened a bit at that. After a moment he got a smile and said, "Do you have any idea how insanely jealous Malfoy is going to be?"

Daphne rolled her eyes and laughed, "Men" she muttered. "You do realize that the Malfoys are as rich as you are?"

"As we are" he corrected.

She looked at him, surprised and then a goofy grin came over her face and she lightly kissed him.

He chuckled at her reaction and said, "I get it. You're making great points." He got a far away look and said, "I wonder..."

"What?"

He shook his head and said, "Neville's grandmother. Neville says she's a right Tartar about duty and obligation, I wonder if we could bend her ear a bit? I bet she's a wealth of information and advice. I admit, I'm feeling pretty overwhelmed and underprepared."

Daphne nodded her head, impressed. "Great idea. You get to write that letter, though. Coming from me, even as your wife, would seem presumptuous to Lady Augusta."

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They walked into The Pear Tree, the teashop they were to meet Remus and Harry breathed a sigh of relief. It was like Madam Puddifoot's, but with class. After a quick survey, they saw Remus sitting in the back with a teapot on the table and staring into his cup.

As they made their way back to him, Daphne noticed that Lupin looked bad. More roughed up than she'd ever seen him during third year. His hair was dirty and disheveled, dark circles were under his eyes and it looked like he hadn't shaved in three or four days.

Lupin started in surprise as Harry pulled Daphne's chair out for her. Looking between Harry and Daphne in befuddlement, he was quiet until Harry sat next to her and said, "Professor Lupin, I'd like you to meet my wife, Daphne Potter."

Remus' eyes widened and he repeated the fish-like movements that the professors had demonstrated the day before. Maybe it's a professor thing, Daphne laughed to herself.

"Uh, well. I..." the werewolf forcibly pulled himself together and said, "Congratulations you two. How did this come about?"

Harry's happy expression melted into a somber one. "Before we get to the happy news, I need some questions answered, Professor."

"Remus, call me Remus. Or even Moony if that's easier for you."

Harry nodded, "Right. Moony, I need straight answers."

"Of course, Harry. What do you need to know?"

"If forced to choose between Dumbledore and me, who would you choose?"

Remus stared at Harry for a second. "You" he answered simply.

Harry regarded the last tie to his parents with a jaundiced eye. "Really. Then could you, and I don't mean to be rude. But could you please explain your absence from my life until I was in third year and your absence from it afterward?"

The older man sighed, leaned back in his chair and regarded his teacup thoughtfully. After a moment he muttered, "Valid questions, both of them."

Without looking up, Lupin said, "You have to understand, Harry. From late '81 until maybe mid '84 I doubt I drew a sober breath." He looked at the dark haired young man with tears in his eyes, obviously remembering with vivid detail his life at that time. "Imagine that Ron, Hermione and Neville are all killed and Ginny was responsible for it."

Harry nodded, "I can understand that."

Daphne watched the interplay as a disinterested observer. She liked Lupin as a teacher, the best they'd had in Defense as far as she was concerned. Intellectually, she knew the whole hysteria about werewolves was so much bunkum; however, she couldn't help be uneasy in his presence. This irritated her to no end, as she knew that so long as they confine themselves when they transform, it's irrelevant if a person is a werewolf. Nevertheless, there it was, the conditioning that werewolves were evil and to be shunned. It shamed and angered her that she felt this way.

Returning to the present, she observed that Lupin seemed to be telling the truth about his fractured past, but strangely, Harry seemed unmoved.

Remus looked back at his teacup and a single tear dribbled down his cheek that he quickly wiped away. "When I finally began to pull myself together, I went to Dumbledore to find out where you were.

With Sirius in prison, I knew that he'd know where you were placed."

He sighed, set his cup down, and ran his hands through his matted hair. "Dumbledore told me that he'd enacted 'special wards' around your place of residence and if any magic user approached, they'd react 'very forcefully,' possibly even fatally."

The Potters' eyes bulged at this blatant falsehood and Remus smiled a cracked smile, "I know. Sounds like so much bullshit now, but at the time I believed him and what was I to do? Beat him up until he told me where you were?" Harry and Daphne finally smiled for the first time at that statement.

He shook his head ruefully. "I didn't know where you were. In retrospect, I knew that Lily had a sister, but not that she'd married or where they lived. I'd inherited a tidy sum from James and Lily, but I'd spent the bulk of it in the previous years on food, shelter and copious amounts of firewhiskey."

"When you finally started school, I thought about sneaking into the school and introducing myself to you."

Daphne looked at her grinning husband and grinning former teacher wondering why this would be a good idea. When she put voice to said question, Harry said, "Remind me to tell you about the Marauders later, love."

Lupin's grin widened, but quickly failed when he said, "But I lost my nerve and didn't do it. I fell into my cycle of fear regarding my affliction." He looked to Harry and got a nod of understanding in return.

The werewolf waved his hand in semi-frustration and said, "In the end, I was a coward. After your third year, I was in desperate need of funding and when Sirius and I linked up in your fourth year, I had somewhere to live, but I spent as much time taking care of him - his

health was bad - as I did taking care of myself."

He looked directly into Harry's eye at this point and with a hint of fire said, "The summer after the tournament, I spent at least eight hours a day guarding you and on many nights, apparated into your bedroom and calmed you during your nightmares.

"Why didn't you at least talk to me then?" Harry asked softly.

With a sigh, the older man said, "I was terrified that I'd let you down by not teaching you enough. By not being there, even though I knew then and know now that it was beyond my control. I was terrified I'd screw up and not be able to protect you so I kept my emotional distance."

Daphne bit her lip and looked to her husband. Harry just sat there, quietly processing what was said when she couldn't keep quiet and said, "Pardon my saying Remus, but that is so much bullshit, I don't know where to begin shoveling."

At the surprised expressions on the two men's face, she said to the elder, "I have no idea why you would think you didn't teach Harry enough, you were our best teacher. You even taught him the Patronus Charm. As you said earlier, Dumbledore refused to tell you where my husband was so you couldn't be there; you were denied that ability due to no fault of your own. Now you lay this tripe out about being 'terrified?' Bollocks, I say."

Lupin looked at her with a shocked expression that melted into a smile and ended with a chuckling man who looked years younger. "Thank you so much Daphne, may I call you Daphne?" At her nod, he continued, "I haven't had someone read me the riot act since Lily died."

His chuckling died away and he sat there silent, thinking. After a few minutes, during which Harry and Daphne poured for themselves and

Harry went to the counter and ordered a plate of biscuits for them all to share.

Remus nibbled on the shortbread and finally said in a lost voice, "I was scared. I was scared that you'd think that I let you down. I felt like I'd let James, Lily even Sirius down. I was scared that you'd reject me because now you knew about my lycanthropy." He raised his hand at the objections about to be voiced from his younger companions.

"Fear doesn't know reason. I'm telling you what I felt. To compound it all, I don't deal with fear very well. Occupational hazard of being labeled a 'dark creature' you know."

Harry looked at Remus with a questioning expression and Moony elaborated, "I've had people throw stones at me, spit on me, call me the worst names that you can think of. I've been fired from more jobs than I can count and been turned down from even more. After a while, a person expects the rejection and when there's a hope for a relationship with someone such as yourself, I feel an incredible amount of fear that I'll lose what I so desperately want. I don't deal with that fear very well, so I usually run, expecting that I'll be rejected again."

Daphne nodded. She didn't like it, but it was honest.

Harry said the same, "Thank you for being honest with me Moony. I need honest people around me now." He paused and glanced at his wife who nodded to him in agreement.

"Moony, would you like some short-term employment?"

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Harry went on to explain the basics of the prophecy and his need for training, similar to the discussion of the previous day.

"Our need" Daphne interjected at this point.

A reeling Remus Lupin shook himself and grasped onto that line. "Yes, I need some good news here, tell me how you two ended up married." With a roguish grin he said, "I trust there are no offspring involved."

Daphne rose to the challenge, "Not yet, but we're working on it."

Remus laughed and then looked at Harry and Daphne expectantly. Harry's face lost all expression and he looked into his lap. Daphne reached out and rubbed his back, saying, "I was sitting by the stream that divides the Greengrass and Potter properties near Ullswater Lake on the evening of the 30th of June..."

When Daphne gave the brief rundown of Harry's injuries, Remus reached out with both hands and turned Harry's face to his own. Daphne saw tears streaming down the older man's face as he looked into his best friend's son's face. After a moment, Remus came around the table and engulfed Harry in a hug that, after a moment, Harry returned.

When the two broke their embrace, Daphne continued the story. When she wryly described her discussion with Harry regarding the Marriage Contract he'd just arranged, Remus beamed at Harry and chuckled. "Just what your father would have done Harry."

At the end of the tale, the three magical persons sat there, emotionally wrung out and somewhat hungry. "Where are you staying, Remus?"

"That place where Sirius grew up."

Harry nodded, turning to his wife, "The place Dumbledore has under the Fidelius" to which she nodded in return.



"Ok, let's go get some food and we'll talk more about the instruction for the summer."

They walked a few blocks to a place that Remus knew. "Guru Indian Restaurant. Best Indian food outside of downtown London. I know the fellow and his wife who run the place. Come on."

Daphne went into the restaurant a bit wide eyed and Harry leaned down to her, "Ever had Indian food?"

She shook her head and he said, "Me either. We'll discover it together." She looked at him and wanted to kiss his lips off. You are so thoughtful.

They had a wonderful dinner, Remus talking them through the menu and they had lighthearted discussion with Moony telling stories about the Marauders time at Hogwarts. On more than one occasion Daphne almost spit her water out, she was laughing so hard. When she'd found out that Snape had been their primary target, she started giggling uncontrollably.

Harry, with a smile of his own said, "What's so funny?"

After a moment or two she said, "Most Slytherins hate that greasy berk, but he so heavily favors us that it's hard to be snarky about him being our head of house. To harass him, we should start sending him insulting notes signed by the Marauders. Really set him off."

Remus laughed at that, "Our sixth year, he developed a twitch any time he saw James or Sirius. It was on the left side of his face by his eye. Looked like he was winking at you if you didn't look too closely."

When the laughter died down, Harry took a sip of his drink and said, "Moony is the Order really out looking for me?"

Lupin's face saddened for a minute, remembering his worry over the last few days and he nodded.

Getting a far away look in his eyes for a minute, Harry then said, "Go ahead and tell everyone you've seen me and I'm safe. Nothing about where I'm living or Daphne though."

The werewolf nodded and took a bite of his dinner. Daphne asked, "Will Dumbledore or Snape be able to get into your head?"

He smiled at her and tapped his temple. "Werewolf" he said with a grin, "It's not a safe place for a Legilimens to go. The spirit of the wolf protects my mind without any effort or direction from me. It'd rip any Legilimens' mind to shreds."

Harry paid for the meal and they ambled out the door into the darkness. "I'll be over to Rowan Hill Monday at one," said Remus. "I'll put you both through your paces and talk to Filius and Minerva so we can coordinate the tuition."

Harry nodded and looked to Daphne with a pleading expression in his eyes. Concerned, she wrapped her arm around his and leaned into him. Finally, Harry said in a low voice, "Moony, I'm so sorry about Sirius."

Tears sprang to life in both men's eyes and they simultaneously looked at the cracked sidewalk as if it held the mysteries of life. In a choked voice, Remus answered, "Thank you Harry, he was my best friend." He put his large, scarred hand on Harry's shoulder and said softly, "I don't blame you for what happened. Sirius made his choice and went out like a man, not a hunted beast. I know for a fact that's what he wanted."

Harry could only nod and Remus gave him a short hug and said, "Until Monday" before apparating away.

They stood there on the sidewalk while Harry regained his composure. After a minute or two, he smiled at his wife and said, "Let's go get some ice cream."

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07 July 1996

Harry and Daphne chatted as they finished their sumptuous breakfast. While Dobby packed everything up and moved them to Rowan Hill, Daphne was going to see Tracey and Harry to visit Hermione. When he told her of his intention, she'd fixed him with an unblinking stare.

"So, you are going off to visit an unattached woman by yourself."

Completely taken aback, he'd just stared at her sputtering, "But she's one of my best friends, nothing more" repeatedly for a good fifteen seconds before she'd started to laugh.

"I'm teasing." She paused, "But only because it's Granger." After a quick kiss, she'd gone to the fireplace. She called over her shoulder, "Meet for lunch at Rowan Hill?"

"I love you," he said in response.

She stopped. In her mind, all her thoughts and plans for the day paused, as if the cacophony of a crowded metropolitan street suddenly stilled. She turned and ran back to him, embracing him tightly.

"I love you, too."

After a moment, she pulled back and saw the soft smile on his face, "It's still so new, sometimes it surprises me that you love me," she said softly.

"Go, I'll see you at noon at the house" and he kissed her softly.

She smiled at him as green flames twirled her away.

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She popped out of the fireplace in the entry foyer at Davis Hall just as Belinda Davis was walking by, a house elf in tow.

"Daphne, what a surprise. We didn't expect you..." the older woman trailed off as she noticed the rings on Daphne's hand.

With a raised eyebrow, Belinda said, "I thought you said I could come to the wedding."

Daphne blushed slightly and said, "Is Tracey at home? I'd like to tell the story once."

After dispatching the family house elf to bring Tracey and the visiting Blaise to the drawing room, Belinda gave Daphne a small smile and said, "Come my dear, us married women must stick together."

After tea was provided and poured, Tracey entered, followed by Blaise. They both looked a bit ruffled and Daphne hid a smile behind the rim of her cup. "Hey there girl. What's the news..." her eyes fixed on Daphne's rings and her face hardened. "I can't believe you went and married him and didn't even tell me."

Blaise's eyes widened in shock. Tracey had just given him an overview; "Daphne is dating Potter and she loves him. We have to help her" was the extent of the discussion. "Married?"

Daphne held up her hands and told the story of her marriage contract. At the end, Tracey had calmed and Blaise was shaking his head muttering "Bloody Gryffindors."

Belinda inclined her head and said, "Based on our discussion of the other day, this is not unwanted?"

Daphne gave her a big smile and said, "No, not at all. Most welcome."

Belinda nodded while her daughter and her daughter's boyfriend assimilated the information. "Well, it solves your problem. You two will still be in your respective houses but will live in the married quarters near Ravenclaw tower."

She sat for a minute, thinking and said, "There was a married couple a few years ahead of me. I'm trying to remember but it's escaping me how the rules affected them. You probably ought to write Professor Snape and inform him of your marriage and request a copy of the Hogwarts rules for married students."

Daphne's face must have betrayed her, despite her best efforts and the other three laughed. "Yes, Professor Snape is most unpleasant. Terrible hygiene on top of horrific manners, but it would go a long way for you to show him the courtesy of informing him. You should also formally inform the Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress as well. That should be a joint letter."

In the silence that followed, in his smooth, cultured voice, Blaise said, "Congratulations on your marriage, my Lady" and he stood and gave Daphne a picture perfect bow.

Tracey, too, stood and with a smile embraced her friend and kissed her cheek. "Are you happy?" she whispered in Daphne's ear.

"Ecstatic."

Tracey nodded then and they discussed school and some of the changes they expected. "So I forget, are you legally an adult now?"

Daphne smiled, pulled her wand and changed Tracey's hair Slytherin Green.

"I guess that's a yes, then." said Blaise.

"Malfoy is going to go out of his mind," he observed as Belinda restored Tracey's hair to its normal butter blond. "Not only has he had his eye on you, but he is insanely jealous of Potter in general. Two for one."

"Have you talked to your father since?" Tracey asked.

Daphne shook her head, "Mother was happy, Astoria was a bit snarky but that was stopped shortly. Phillip was so cute, he asked Harry to teach him how to be a Seeker."

They all smiled at that and Belinda said, "You are now the wife of the Head of one of the Fifteen, you should learn your duties and responsibilities soon."

Daphne nodded and said, "Actually, Harry is Lord Potter and Lord Black, and we are going to ask Lady Augusta Longbottom for some of her precious time to try and learn from her experience. I believe her husband was Longbottom of Longbottom for over one hundred years."

She deliberately told everyone this information. Tracey was a great friend, but information like this was too juicy not to spread into the rumor mill. Daphne wanted their status to be known with the intention of even further solidifying their safety at school. She gave Tracey a little nod, to let her know this information was fair game for gossip.

Blaise had a calculating look on his face, but said nothing.

They chatted a few hours, Daphne demurring on their living

arrangements on the ground of security. A little before noon, she set up privacy wards and used the Floo, calling out "Rowan Hill!" before twisting away home.

She stepped out of the fireplace into the massive entry hall of her new home. The entry hall was nearly as big as Hogwarts, but where Hogwarts was constructed of plain grey granite, Rowan Hill's entry hall was crafted of white Italian marble. She was still stunned at the opulent beauty of the hall. Directly across from the fireplace, so that it was impossible to miss, was a fifteen-foot tall Potter coat of arms inlaid in gold and platinum. Various paintings of notable ancestors were sprinkled about, the resemblance to Harry, striking.

She called out "Harry?" and he called out of the library door saying, "I'm over here."

He had quite a few books spread across one of the two worktables in the massive library. He had one open in front of him that appeared to be hand written.

Holding it up for her inspection, he said, "It's a compendium of the past Heads of the Potter family on being one of the Fifteen. About nine hundred years worth of advice. Pretty impressive. I've started reading from about two hundred years ago to the present. When we've more time, I'll read the older entries."

She sat next to him and pulled some of the other texts to her and saw Wizengamot Policies and Procedures, Wizard Law vol I, Gringotts Bank and You; a compendium of services and regulations. There were more and she was impressed. He was really throwing himself into learning his place.

"How did it go with Granger?"

He set his book down and his expression became unutterably sad. "Her parents want to withdraw her from Hogwarts."

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Daphne sat, horrified, as Harry told her about his visit to Hermione. "I apparated to a park I knew of near her house and walked up the street. When she answered the door I could tell that she'd been crying and when it registered with her that it was me at her door, she threw herself in my arms, sobbing."

Daphne shuddered to herself and could relate. If her parents made her quit school, her reaction would probably be similar. After she'd killed them, of course.

"We kind of stumbled into the house and collapsed on a couch as she cried. After about ten minutes she told me that her parents were really upset about her getting hurt at the Department of Mysteries and after everything that had happened in the previous years, told her they were pulling her out."

He rubbed his face and ran his hands through his hair as he hunched over and said, "She was borderline hysterical. She'd tried to discuss it with them but apparently her Dad cut her off and said, 'It's decided. No more of this magical foolishness.'" Harry looked at Daphne with wide, pain-filled eyes and said, "She was devastated."

Harry sat there leaning his forearms on his thighs, his hands in his hair. She scooted her chair closer and started rubbing his back in slow gentle circles. "I don't know what to do, Daph," he muttered after a few minutes.

"I do" she responded with a hint of fire. "We're going back this evening to have a bit of a discussion with the Grangers."

Fifteen minutes later, Harry scribbled a quick missive to Hermione and Hedwig winged away before lunch was ready. Daphne told him about her discussions at Davis Hall and what she called "controlled



information dissemination."

He leaned back in his chair and said, "Do you really think that's a good idea?"

She crawled into his lap and kissed his neck, causing a shiver down his spine. Wizarding culture lesson begins again she thought to herself. "The primary persons that we are concerned about violent attack from are also very political or politically concerned. Getting the word out that you have accepted your mantle as one of the Fifteen and have inherited another seat will make the Malfoys, Notts, Parkinsons and their ilk seriously pause before they do anything. You are as much of a threat to them with your position as you are with your wand, Gryffindor husband of mine."

By now, he was kissing down her neck and she shivered. His hands ran up her robes and caressed her thigh. At this point, all rational thought departed both of them and lunch was late again.

.oOo.

Harry stood still as Daphne straightened his tie before they rang the bell at the Grangers' house. After their lunch, Harry had installed the newly purchased exercise equipment in a large lumber-room next to the conservatory while Daphne read The Dueling Masters Training Guide, taking notes on exercise regimens for them.

Fortunately, Rowan Hill was a sprawling estate that bordered Cardigan Bay in Wales. There were rolling hills and thick hardwood forests crawling up into the mountains to the north. The bay was visible from their bedroom balcony, so swimming was also a valid option for exercise. In her mind, Daphne was trying to figure out routes for them to first walk and then run as they progressed. For a moment, her eyes glazed over as she daydreamed about Harry in his exercise clothes but she shook her head and with a smile, got back to work.

They'd had a leisurely meal in the family dining room as Daphne laid out the plan she'd developed. Afterwards, they'd explored the house a bit before getting cleaned up and apparating to the park near Hermione's house.

Harry was wearing a standard blue blazer of obvious quality with the cuffs unbuttoned. His handmade Egyptian cotton shirt, standard khaki slacks and handmade shoes topped off his ensemble. Obvious wealth in an understated way was what Daphne had described.

She, however, was dressed to the nines. Harry had tasked Dobby to pop to the Black family vault and return with the women's jewelry for them to peruse and the Potters' had almost fallen over in shock. "There has to be a million galleons of jewelry here," Daphne had breathed.

She settled on a moderately sized necklace that was a string of diamonds with a matching tennis bracelet. Her watch went on her other arm and she wore a stunning deep blue dress that accentuated her figure and eyes. To top it off, she'd put her hair up with a few artful wisps of hair curling around her face. "You're gorgeous" he'd breathed when she came downstairs."

Harry rang the bell and waited five seconds before Hermione opened the door. She had recovered somewhat, but her puffy eyes told her tale more thoroughly than words ever could. She eyed Harry with a hungry hope and when he asked, "Did you get my note?" she nodded.

"Please come in." she said and she tentatively approached Daphne giving her a soft hug, "Take care of my best friend," she'd said.

Daphne said, "I am. Now we're going to take care of you."

Hermione nodded and turned to the parlor where her parents were

reading the paper and listening to music. Corelli, if Daphne wasn't mistaken. Beautiful music at any time of day or night.

"Mum, Dad we have visitors." Daphne and Harry entered the room and the Grangers stood, a bit confused. Hermione turned to the Potters and said, "My Lord, my Lady, may I present to you my parents, Steven and Alice Granger. Mum, Dad, Earl and Countess Potter."

The elder Grangers' expressions morphed from confused to stunned. Harry and Daphne waited, pleasant smiles on their faces (as Daphne had coached him) for the dentists to collect themselves

"Uh, my Lord, my Lady welcome to our home" Steven stumbled out. "Won't you please take a seat?" Harry and Daphne sat as Alice watched Harry closely. They declined the offer for tea and waited for the Grangers to take the initiative.

"So, how can we help you this evening, sir?" Steven said to Harry.

"We" Harry indicated to his wife, "are students with your daughter at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I understand that you and your wife have reservations about allowing Hermione to complete her studies."

Harry and Daphne had discussed how to handle the elder Grangers at length during the day. "They're scared." Daphne had said. "They don't want their daughter to die, and who can blame them?"

Both Grangers stiffened as Harry finished speaking. Take their objections and demolish their arguments with facts Daphne had advised. "Yes, that's true" Steven said, obviously wondering why he was discussing this with two teenage peers.

"You're afraid, aren't you?" Daphne said in a soft tone. "She was hurt badly last month, second year there was her petrification, and there

are the misadventures she gets involved in by being such close friends with my husband, true?"

Steven noticeably relaxed in his chair but Alice was still on guard. "I'm sorry" Hermione's mother said, "and I don't mean to be rude, but how is this any business of yours?"

Harry nodded in agreement and Daphne said, "It's only our business for a one reason, Mrs. Granger." Daphne sat up straighter, unconsciously imitating her mother when she was riled. Daphne struck her aristocratic best posture and said, "Hermione is our friend and we care about her. You both know that she has a first rate mind, but no matter how much anyone wants to deny, evade or cover up the matter, she is a witch. As such, she needs to be a fully trained witch; the person that she is will tolerate nothing less. It would crush her to be less than she could be and if you deny this of her, every morning, she will look in the mirror and see a person that she truly isn't. She will see a person that you made her be and in the end she will hate you for it."

All three Grangers sat and goggled at the coolly delivered rebuke to the non-magicals in the room.

Harry picked up the baton at this point, "There is a war coming here in Britain as I'm sure Hermione has told you. The magical community is small enough that she is known to be a muggleborn witch who stands for the light against the darkness. As such, she is a target. By preventing her completing her education, you sign her death warrant. She knows enough now so that she is dangerous; sometimes to herself, sometimes to others. In order for her to fully defend herself and function in magical society – because as my wife so aptly pointed out, no matter what anyone thinks, Hermione is a witch – she must complete her education. They will come for her and they will come for you. She can't defend herself or you if she is forced to hide now."

The one-two punch of arguments had the elder Grangers reeling a bit, but after a long moment, Alice said, "If it's that dangerous, why shouldn't we move to the States or Australia? Surely we'd be safe then."

"But could you live with yourselves then? Could Hermione?"

Everyone present knew the answer was no. As evidenced by her misguided S.P.E.W., Hermione had a social conscience and could not stand aside and let evil prosper. Every fiber of her being screeched against it and she learned it at the knees of her parents.

The discussion went into the night and around ten-thirty the Grangers conceded the argument and agreed to allow Hermione to return to school. As the Potters walked out, Hermione gave them both her trademark rib-crushing hugs and this time the tears in her eyes were of gratitude.

"Thank you so much, the both of you."

Harry smiled, shook his head and Daphne said, "Your parents love you and they don't want to see you hurt. They couldn't hear what we said tonight from you, they needed to hear it from someone outside the family and the use of our titles was enough to rock them on their heels and let us talk to them as peers, not their daughter's classmates."

Harry nodded in concurrence and said, "I'll send a note to Phalanx Warders, letting them know your parents are coming and that you are friends of ours. It should help move you up in the queue."

She looked back and forth at them and said, "You two work well together, we'll have to get together in less trying circumstances and chat."

After the door closed, Harry looked up and down the street and saw no one, so they apparated home to sleep the deep sleep of the just.

.oOo.

08 July 1996

Daphne stumbled downstairs, wrapping her bathrobe about her and found Harry sitting on the veranda staring at the Daily Prophet as his breakfast cooled. It was a beautifully clear Welsh day with a slight breeze off the bay and as Daphne walked up behind him to rub his shoulders, she saw the headline.

"Ah, crap."

POTTER WEDS PUREBLOOD screamed the headline.

She took a deep breath. She knew how much Harry hated publicity, they'd talked about it often enough. At the same time, she'd also made a toehold in him with the idea that as the head of two of the Fifteen, the-boy-who-lived and the eventual man-who-killed-Voldemort, he really needed to get used to the fact that he was going to be in the papers for the rest of his life and there was no way around it.

The real challenge was managing the press in their favor.

"Well, it was bound to come out eventually. Do they say anything outright defamatory, or is it mostly humorous conjecture?" she said.

"Most of it's conjecture leavened with the occasional fact, but there is a flattering biography of you on page 3. They say you are 'a beautiful, intelligent young woman who is a fitting companion of the Head of the Potter and Black families'. I couldn't agree more" and he turned his head to kiss her hand on his shoulder.

He sighed and leaned back into her. After a moment, he indicated to a letter on the table. "Pig was waiting this morning with a letter from Ron. I haven't had the courage to open it, yet."

Daphne sat next to Harry and opened the letter. After a few moments reading with a few "Hmms" and one "Huh!" she said, "He's mad at you because your letter to him didn't tell you where you were and then he found out from Remus that you were safe and he still doesn't know where you are. He's not directly saying it, but he's pretty pissed."

She read down, "Quidditch. Good god, he's a Cannons fan. What an idiot." She paused as she read and then said, "Apparently his mother is apoplectic that you aren't either at Sirius' old home or at The Burrow." She paused and asked, "I assume that's Weasley's house?"

When he nodded, she continued reading, "More about Hermione. Does he have a clue about what's going on in her life at all? I'm not as close to her as you two are and I know more than him and he's still yammering about Krum."

She dropped the letter on the table, stood and walked over to the side table to plate up her breakfast. After popping a strawberry in her mouth, she spooned up a bowl of fruit to go with her eggs, bacon and kippers.

"So what do you want to do today?"

She turned to him, gave him a sultry smile and said, "Make love to you all day."

This finally got a big smile out of him and he said, "As you wish my Lady." After they laughed he said, "Thanks, I needed a chuckle. So, a day at home, relaxing. Today is Saturday; McGonagall, Flitwick and Lupin start up on us in two days."

She nodded as she ate. After swallowing, she said, "Sounds good. Do you want to swim or run today?"

"Well, I don't really know how to swim, so we'll start with running. That Ok with you?"

"Sure. Do our workout before lunch?"

Harry nodded back and said, "I want to get some more of the Advanced Magical Combat reading in for Monday and also the journal of the Potter Heads, too."

"I'll draft up the letter for Lady Augusta and we can send that out. Maybe we should we invite the Longbottoms to tea tomorrow." Daphne said.

Harry nodded, but was distracted from his reply. In a flash of fire, Fawkes appeared at Rowan Hill.

A/N

1. I own nothing. Thanks to everyone who took the time to review, I appreciate it.

2. No Weasley or Dumbles reaction in this chapter. It's already 13k words and that would have made it at least 20k words and that's just too unwieldy. I actually addressed the relationships that were most important to our couple first, leaving these other two as less important.

3. I'll be on vacation, so no updates next week. The week after I ought to have chapter 4 up, but no promises.



## Chapter 4

08 July 1996 (cont'd)

Harry's head dropped while Daphne stared in rapturous amazement as the Phoenix circled and then alighted on the breakfast table, dropping a letter in front of the ninth Earl of Potter. The firebird seemed to wait for the young man's attention and when Harry looked back up, he caught the young man's eye. They gazed at each other for a solid minute before Fawkes trilled a joyous song.

The Phoenix looked at Daphne, gave a short happy trill that caused a delighted tingling to shoot up and down her spine before he took off and a moment later, disappeared in a ball of fire.

"Thanks Fawkes," said Harry in a grateful voice. Daphne looked at him with a quizzical expression and he said, "When I saw him, I immediately assumed the bastard of a Headmaster was going to destroy our Idyll that we have." She smiled and took his hand. He returned her smile and then said, "When our eyes met, he seemed to tell me with ...images? emotion? That our Idyll is of our own making and no one can take it from us." He gave a short laugh and said, "They can make it really hard, but they can't take it from us, because it springs from us."

"All that with just a look."

"He's a Phoenix, what can I say?"

"He's beautiful. Amazing. I don't really have the words to completely describe him."

Harry nodded to her, "True." He knew he was stalling, hoping that if he ignored the folded piece of parchment in front of him that was sealed with a purple wax seal, it might somehow disappear.

Finally, he muttered, "Gryffindors Forward" and leaned over to grasp the letter.

Daphne grabbed his wrist and said, "Are the anti-portkey and anti-apparition wards active?"

He nodded and shot her a smile of thanks before concentrating for a moment. The ward book had explained how the wards obeyed his commands. As the primary owner of the property, he could mentally control the wards and in his absence, they obeyed Daphne. As their family grew, he could choose to add their children.

Once he verified the wards were configured appropriately, Harry reached out for the letter again, broke the seal and read. After reading the letter, he silently handed it to Daphne while staring straight ahead.

Oh, this can't be good she thought to herself. It was not.

"That utter and complete bastard," she said in a deadpan voice. "He is disappointed that you ran away from your 'family' and wants you to go back there to reconstitute the wards and then to Sirius' house. He had hopes that you would put away your childish ways after he showed so much trust in you at the end of last term. He hopes he wasn't wrong. Amazing, the arrogance of that old man." She was getting very angry now and her softly tanned face flushed with emotion.

"At least we know McGonagall and Flitwick didn't go blabbing to him," Harry said in a flat tone.

She glanced at him with a worried look and said, "Yes, that's true."

Reading on, she exclaimed, "He can't be serious. He really can't be seriously trying to tell you that we need to find a way to dissolve our marriage. He really can't be serious in trying to order one of the

Fifteen around like that." She read on a bit further, "Oh, I see. I'm a dark arts supporter because my Father is a complete ass. Brilliant deduction Dumbledore."

Despite their earlier discussion about being in control of their own destiny, Dumbledore's letter scared Daphne. He was a powerful Wizard both politically and magically. Could he take Harry away from her? While her heart screamed in defiance, her mouth howled in wrath. Her amazement at Dumbledore's audacity turned to fury by the end of the letter.

"He knows what's best! He'll take care of everything! You need to trust him! Ugh!" She got up, throwing the letter down as if it were a hot coal and stormed off down the steps of the veranda. She stopped, as if she had forgotten something, and hurried back up the steps. She kissed Harry deeply and thoroughly before saying, "I'm sorry, I'm too upset to talk right now. I'll be back in five minutes, Ok?"

He nodded to her with an amused expression, before watching her walk away. With a little 'Sirius inspired brainstorm', he called out, "Do you know you have a really sexy arse?" `

She turned back, smiling and blew him a kiss before sashaying down the path to the formal garden.

When she turned away from him, his smile disappeared.

.oOo.

She wandered the garden for a good ten minutes, cooling off as she walked. She had a short fuse and could fire up quickly, but when the irritation passed, she cooled off soon thereafter. For most things.

The very few who she formed implacable resentment toward, those people she never forgave and she burned with a cold anger. Fortunately, for her, it was a small list. Her Father. Voldemort.

Dursleys. Dumbledore.

For the average, everyday upset, gardens and the outdoors always helped her regain her equilibrium; it was as if they absorbed all her hostile feelings.

Wandering back to the house, she found Harry sitting at the table on the veranda with his books in front of him. He was reading Advanced Magical Combat, which she plucked, out of his hands in order to sit in his lap.

He sighed and put his arms around her, pulling her close. After a moment he said, "I'm this close to withdrawing us from Hogwarts and having tutors finish our last two years."

She was surprised, but after quick reflection, she shouldn't have been. Dumbledore had been central to his godfather's death, the withholding of the prophecy, installation of a power limiting ward, tacit condoning of the years of physical abuse that Harry suffered and willful suppression of Harry's heritage and role in Magical society. Who knew what else the old man had done? Of course, her husband would consider Dumbledore to be nearly an enemy now.

She snuggled closer to him, feeling his warm breath on her neck and enjoying the physical closeness; a type of intimacy other than sexual that was as wonderful as when they shared themselves with each other. She kissed the side of his head tenderly, knowing that he was greatly conflicted, angry and probably very sad as well.

"You've always looked up to him, haven't you?" she said softly.

He nodded and she said, "Do you feel like he's let you down?" When he didn't respond, she prodded him, "With the ward and so on."

With a big sigh, he said, "Yeah. I really don't want to deal with him at all. There's enough going on with Voldemort. Plus, for the first time in

my life, it's pretty damn good and I don't want to lose it."

Daphne stood, "Ok, enough of this. I love you, you love me. We're married and I intend on shagging you at least twice today. Now, let's go for a walk down to the beach" she said in a humorous no-nonsense tone, the wide smile adding fuel to her intent.

He laughed as she pulled him out of his chair and they walked arm-in-arm to the shingle beach just down the path.

.oOo.

Where they left the house on an upswing of emotion, hope peeking through the clouds of gloom, Harry stormed back to the house, furious. Daphne trailed behind at a safe distance, figuring that this was one of those times that Mount Potter just had to blow.

They had been ambling down the beach, hand in hand and it was like something out of a novel (which kind, she'd never tell Harry). They were chatting about their likes and dislikes. Favorite subjects. Hopes and dreams.

Her throat had a closed up in opposition when he said, "I just want to live past Voldemort. I want our family to grow, but really? I just want us to make it past him."

She had plastered a happy expression on her face and forced out her reassurances that she believed he would kill the snake-faced bastard and they would have their three babies to raise and love. Inside, she'd teemed with anger that Dumbledore had dropped the prophecy on Harry minutes after his godfather had died and then patted him on the head, sending him home with no guidance or plan for preparation.

Voldemort? He was just an animal. It's easy to fear him, probably

wise to fear him. She did despise him and what he espoused, but hate? How can one hate an animal? One put a rabid animal down for the good of the community and mercy for the suffering beast.

Dumbledore, though, he was a man. He will be held accountable.

Just as they'd turned back toward the stairs up the cliff to the house, an owl came flying toward them in a herky-jerky, disjointed manner. When it approached Harry said, "Errol?" in an undertone.

Daphne's eyebrows shot up when she saw the letter it bore. A bright red letter.

Errol performed a perfect dive-bombing run, releasing the howler right above Harry and then staggered away, if a bird could be said to stagger in flight.

Harry looked at Daphne with an expression of disbelief, shrugged and then opened the volatile missive.

HARRY POTTER! YOU COME TO THE BURROW IMMEDIATELY! WE'VE BEEN WORRIED SICK ABOUT YOU, AND NOW WE FIND YOU'VE BEEN CONSORTING WITH A HUSSY AND ENDED UP IN A HORRIBLE FIX! I'M VERY DISSAPOINTED IN YOUR BEHAVIOR YOUNG MAN; YOU ARE IN QUITE A BIT OF TROUBLE! YOU'D BEST BE HERE BY DINNER TIME, OR ELSE!

Harry's confused expression slowly melted into cold fury. He let it set for a long moment and at that point, Daphne was more scared for mother Weasley than insulted by her. "Harry?" she asked in a soft voice.

"Come on, we need to deal with this immediately. Get changed" and he took off to the house in long strides.

She lagged behind when he started muttering to himself and by the

time he reached the top of the stairs from the beach to the top of the cliff, he was shouting.

She smirked a bit. This is going to be fun.

.oOo.

She was right.

He was waiting for her in the entry hall, wearing expensive robes and pacing. He glanced at her, saw her dressed similarly to him and he nodded. "Follow my lead" he said and tossed in the Floo powder shouting "The Burrow!"

Daphne followed a moment later and when she stepped out of fireplace at the Weasley residence, Harry was waiting to hand her out. Molly Weasley bustled out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel, spotting Harry said, "Oh Harry, I'm so glad...", then she spotted Daphne and her eyes narrowed. "You" she sputtered.

At this point Harry pulled out his wand and began the instruction for the day. "Silencio" he cast and the matron of the Weasley family was cut off abruptly.

Daphne heard a commotion and saw Ginny Weasley watching the proceedings from the landing of the stairs wearing an expression of complete astonishment.

Hearing snickers; she turned and saw the irrepressible Weasley twins behind her in the entryway wearing big grins, which she returned when they both flashed her double thumbs up. She'd always liked the boys. They'd tried to prank her in her fourth year and she'd turned it around on them so that they'd been sporting pink hair for a week. Instead of being offended at being outsmarted, the three had laughed about it and been amicable since.

"Mrs. Weasley" Harry said in a cold voice. Daphne returned her attention to her husband and he said, "We have come to your home today in hopes that you sent that howler in a moment of pique and that you since regretted it. I sincerely hoped so, as I found it rude, offensive and completely inappropriate. You have insulted my wife, my station and me. If I remove the Silencing charm, can we discuss this or will you continue to be rude and offensive and attempt to shout at me?"

Molly was red faced and rooting around in her apron and robes for her wand to cancel the spell. Not getting any response, Harry sighed and looked around. Seeing Fred and George he said, "Misters Weasley, is your Father at home?"

"Sure, Harry. Want me to get him?" said Fred.

"Yes, if you please. Tell him Lord Potter requires his presence."

Fred paused, looked at Harry with a questioning look to which Harry inclined his head toward the still red-faced matron. Nodding, Fred said, "Right away, my Lord."

George walked up to the Potters and quietly said, "So, congratulations are in order here."

Harry's entire demeanor shifted and he lit up like an electric bulb. Pulling Daphne close, he said, "Yes, I've never been happier."

George smiled and nodded, "Good. You both deserve it. Swing by the shop sometime soon, partners." As he shook Harry's hand and gave Daphne a peck on the cheek, they heard the clomping of feet from the stairs as Ginny walked back up.

Just then, Arthur came in with Ron in tow, a smiling Fred bringing up the rear. Fred had obviously tipped off his father that Harry was right pissed and that he was using the old forms. Arthur approached Harry,



gave a slight bow and said, "My Lord, welcome back to my humble home. How may I serve you?"

Molly goggled at her husband, grabbed his arm and pointed at her mouth. She was stunned when Arthur ignored her and paid attention to Harry.

Daphne approved of the approach her husband was taking. He'd tried to talk to the Weasley matron as a friend of her family and she'd closed off that avenue of discussion by her attempt to rant at Harry. Since that approach failed, Harry was going to treat with Arthur as two heads of family, of which Harry was far, far senior.

Harry glanced at Daphne who gave him a slight nod. He then returned Arthur's bow and said, "Mr. Weasley, my visit today is most troublesome to me. I have always held your family in great esteem and affection, but today I received a most offensive howler from your wife."

At this, Arthur sighed and bowed his head in resignation. Harry continued, "In it, your wife called my wife a name I will not repeat, threatened my person with punishment of some sort and reproved me as if she were in a position of authority over me."

At this point, Molly forgot she was under the effects of a Silencing charm and put her hands on her hips and started jawing at the young peer, pointing a finger every now and then for good measure. When her face began to purple, Harry returned his attention to Arthur and merely indicated with his hand to Molly.

After a pause, Arthur said, "My Lord, I wish to express my extreme regret for the offensive behavior of my spouse and guarantee that she shall be upbraided most severely."

At this point, Ron opened his mouth, proving the old maxim that it is better to remain silent and thought a fool, than to open your mouth

and be proved a fool. He opted for the latter. "Hold on Dad. I was there when Mum wrote the howler and she didn't say anything too rough or out of line."

Arthur bit his lip; it was obvious to Daphne that he wanted to choke his youngest son. He'd been on the verge of escaping this incident with nothing more than a mild tongue-lashing and Ron had to inflame the situation. Arthur was well aware that as one of the Fifteen, Harry could ruin him at the Ministry if he wanted to. Teenage spats and upsets are one thing, insulting an Earl and Countess was quite another, and Arthur knew it. "Ronald, be silent!" the usually mild mannered man spat.

Ron's eyes widened and he looked to Harry and said, "Mate, you gotta understand, we're just worried about you and" here he gestured at Daphne as if she were a prize heifer at the fair, "her being together. We're just worried about, well, you know, potions and such."

Harry's eyes widened at Ron and his head whipped around to glare at Arthur. Daphne had drilled into him that as Head of the House of Potter and Black, he was responsible for the behavior (within limits) of those in his family. He was treating Arthur the way he expected to be treated and very displeased with the behavior of the Family Weasley.

"Mr. Weasley, this of the second time in less than an hour that my wife had been insulted by a member of your family" Harry said in a threatening undertone.

"Harry, mate, what's going on here? Does she have you under the Imperius? I bet she does" and Ron reached for his wand.

In a move that shocked everyone in the room save the twins and Daphne, Arthur turned to Ron and slapped him across the face. When Ron got his wits back, Arthur barked, "Apologize to Lady Potter!"

"But Dad, she's a Slyth..." and his father cut him off again.

"Apologize now!"

George said in the most serious voice that any had ever heard out of the mouths of the twins, "Best do it Ronniekins."

Ron looked around the room, a stunned expression on his face. He rubbed his cheek where his father had slapped him, looked at Daphne and said in a halting voice, "Lady Potter, I apologize for my comments."

Daphne narrowed her eyes at Ron to convey her extreme displeasure and then looked at Arthur, nodding her head.

Arthur gestured to the stairs and Ron headed up to his room, Harry pointedly ignored the lanky redhead.

Harry said to Arthur, "Mr. Weasley, as I said before, I hold you and your family in great esteem, this situation notwithstanding. However, I should also make clear that I have obviously claimed the mantle as Head of the House of Potter and Black with all rights, duties and responsibilities therein. I am, essentially, an adult in the eyes of the law. I expect to be treated as such. Good day sir." They shook hands, Arthur bent over Daphne's hand and the Potters used the Floo to return home.

.oOo.

When Harry tumbled out of the fireplace, Daphne helped him up with a big smile on her face. He saw it, scowled and started to stomp away. Rolling her eyes, she caught up to him and gave him a big kiss.

"What was that for?" he asked.

"You did really well at the Weasleys'. I could tell you wanted to smack the spit out of the mouth of the youngest male idiot and his mother." She paused and then said, "You did very well. The tone was right, the verbiage right and you treated Weasley Pere with respect and dignity but didn't let the boorish behavior of his spawn and spouse slide."

Harry shook his head, "I just can't believe that Ron was saying those horrible things about you. I know he's a hothead, but he was implying love potions and an Unforgivable for crying out loud." He got an impish grin and said, "Sorry love, I can throw off Voldemort's Imperius, yours would be nothing compared to that and he knows it." He pulled her close and Daphne heard him mutter "Berk."

"Don't worry about him, he'll either grow up or we'll move on." He pulled back and looked at her with a frown so she said, "Love, look at it as objectively as you can. Say...Tracey was the same person she was in our first year; do you think I'd want to associate with her when all she wanted to talk about was her pet kneazle and boys?" He shook his head and she said, "The same is true for Weasley. If he doesn't grow up, you'll move on. It's Ok and normal."

"You did really well today, you know that?" She gave him a much longer kiss, "You behaved as the Head of one of the Fifteen. Come on, let's change and do our workout." She headed up to their room with a smile on her face. She was going to put on a pair of really tight shorts and see how long it would be before they got to their gym.

.oOo.

After their late-starting workout, the Potters looked at each other and Daphne voiced their common thought. "This part sucks." He was out of shape due to the living conditions at his relatives combined with the attack that was only a week in the past.

She was a pureblood, and as such didn't exercise. Most magical

families used magic for all their needs and as such didn't see exercise for health reasons as useful or even sensible.

Together, they had a long road in front of them. "You know, Flitwick, McGonagall and Moony aren't going to cut us any slack?" he said to her as he stripped off his clothes to take a shower.

She contemplated joining him, but then her aching shoulders, legs, arms. Her whole body really, vetoed the idea. She sat at the vanity off the side of the sinks and checked her eyebrows, "Yes, I know that this week is going to be rough. Maybe we should work out before breakfast. Save a shower." She heard an affirmative noise from him as the shower cut off and he reached for his wand to dry himself off.

"Men. Can shower in less than five minutes. It isn't fair." He kissed the top of her head as he walked into his dressing room to get some clothes.

They stumbled into the library after a light lunch and while Harry resumed his reading, Daphne composed a letter to the Dowager Lady Longbottom. She had to run into the stacks a few times to check some etiquette rules, but in the end had an acceptable letter.

As Daphne Greengrass, she had been known by, but not moved in the exalted circles that the Dowager Lady Longbottom frequented. As Countess Daphne Potter, though, she was not only in the circle of the Dowager Lady, but a social superior. The difficult aspect of the letter was to court the Lady's dignity in asking for help and tutelage, but also let Lady Longbottom know that help was not really requested, but required. In addition, to do all this tactfully so as not to offend a well respected woman.

She showed the letter to Harry who read it and at the end, looked over the top of the parchment at her, gave her the knee-watering smile and said, "Do you really think that I could have ever written a letter this good?"

She smiled back at him and said in a sweet voice, "Maybe in ten years or so, love."

They laughed and went back to their studies as Hedwig winged away with the letter.

.oOo.

They studied for most of the afternoon and on one of their breaks they'd found an empty room that they decided would be their practice room. Daphne looked up the spells and runes to protect the walls, ceiling and floor from damage. She recruited Harry for the spellcasting while she carved the runes in the wall.

"I think Runes is my favorite subject. It's like figuring out a puzzle each time we learn a new set."

Harry harrumphed and said, "Give me Charms and Defense every day of the week. Transfiguration is pretty neat, but I don't really get into it like the other two."

She nodded. "For the core courses, I like Transfiguration the best. There's quite a bit of theory, but it all comes together like a folding fan." After a few more minutes and some high power spellcasting by Harry, they were finished.

"Let's take a walk to the beach," he said with a smile.

Dowager Lady Longbottom's reply came just before dinner. "We've been invited to dinner and discussion tomorrow," Harry said as he read the letter. He handed it to Daphne after he finished.

After dinner, Daphne said, "I love you, but don't even think of picking out your clothes for tomorrow night. That's my job."

Harry laughed, "Yes dear."

.oOo.

09 July, 1996

The next morning, they rose at 0600 and did their workout. It was still extremely tiring, but Harry had an excellent incentive in that Daphne wore the tight Lycra shorts again, and in return, he took off his T-shirt. It's all about the little things.

They took a long rambling run up into the hills, stopping every so often as fatigue overtook them. When they got back and were sitting on the veranda drinking lemonade, which Daphne raved over, she said, "How do you want to deal with Dumbledore?"

He sighed and said in a joking tone, "Do I have to?"

She poked him in the shoulder and said, "Yes. Seriously, what do you want to do?"

"What I really want to do is take his wand, break it in front of him, flog him for two days and then hang him from the castle battlements. Somehow, I don't think that's going to happen."

He sighed and pulled her into his lap. She jokingly held her nose and he laughed. After a few minutes, he said, "I don't know. I hate to admit it, but having him at school is a big defense against Voldemort."

Daphne nodded in concurrence and then smiled. "I guess we need to bring out your inner Slytherin then husband of mine."

He looked at her quizzically and she said, "We'll be sneaky and marginalize him. The fangless snake can't hurt you. I don't have any specific ideas, but we can ask Lady Augusta about it. Loyalty to class

is far superior to any loyalty she might have to Dumbledore. We can lay out some basics of the old meddler's transgressions and ask for some advice."

.oOo.

Harry and Daphne called out "Green Hills!" and then were twirled away to the ancient home of the Longbottoms for their first real foray into the political world of the Fifteen. They had talked long about the impact these efforts could have on the struggle with Voldemort.

"I think, that if we can get the Wizengamot firmly on our side, or at least a majority of the Fifteen, the nightmare that was the first war with Voldemort and then the mealy mouthed political expediency of the last year could be a thing of the past" Harry said as he paced in the library.

They were taking a break from their studies and Daphne was stunned that he was finished already with Advanced Magical Combat. He'd read it in three days and could perform most of the spells. She smiled at his statement, though.

"Love, I think you're being a bit naïve. Don't think for a moment that just because you have quite a bit of political muscle now, that the corruption and graft are going to disappear overnight."

He flashed a knowing smile and waved his hand, "Oh, I know that. I just need to talk to Neville and Susan to see how we can begin to address it. I've already invited them and Susan's Aunt to dinner tomorrow night."

Daphne threw back her head and gave a throaty laugh. "I've created a monster. It's alive! It's alive!" to which Harry laughed as well.

They were dressed in formal robes for dinner, what the non-magical world would call a Tux and Gown affair; white tie, not black. Harry



handed his wife out of the Floo and found Neville waiting for them in the entry hall, dressed similarly.

"My Lord Potter, my Lady Potter. It is good to see you and I welcome you to Green Hills," Neville said in a friendly welcome before he executed a well-practiced bow.

Daphne curtsied deeply and Harry returned the bow a little awkwardly before saying, "My Lord Longbottom, it is good to see you again. I assume you are acquainted with my wife?"

At this point, the three couldn't keep it up and they all began laughing. "Harry" said Neville with a smile, "Daphne and I have sat as Potions partners for the last three years. Why do you think I haven't blown up a cauldron since second year?" Harry just smiled and shook his head. Neville held out his hand and said, "Come on, Gran is most excited to meet the two of you. Formalities for introduction, but after that, we'll be mostly informal."

They walked out of the grand Entry Hall and Neville sized up his guests before saying, "I'll be honest, I never imagined the two of you together, much less married. But if you are happy together, I'm happy for you."

"Thanks Neville" said Harry while Daphne waylaid The Longbottom of Longbottom and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"Did you get a new wand?" Harry asked.

Neville smiled and said, "Yeah, Cherry and Unicorn hair. A good fit Mr. Ollivander said."

They entered the main drawing room and found Lady Augusta seated in a chair near the fire. It was a beautiful room, elegantly furnished, apportioned just exactly so and Lady Augusta was the perfect extension of it. It was obvious that she had designed and

furnished the room and it created quite the impression.

She rose and held out her hand to Harry, "My Lord" turned to Daphne and with a smile said, "My Lady, I am sure that I repeat as my Lord Longbottom has already done and bid you welcome to Green Hills."

Harry bowed over her hand and then Daphne and the Lady did simultaneous curtseys. During all this, Lady Augusta had a smile hovering just out of sight. It was evident to Daphne that she was thoroughly enjoying the pomp and circumstance of moving once again in the upper echelons of society and power.

There was general discussion as the four got to know each other better. As dinner was announced, Harry escorted Lady Augusta into the dining room and Neville escorted Daphne.

Midway through the fifth course, Harry caught the nod from his wife and said, "Lady Augusta, from my letter, I hope I conveyed my woeful ignorance of the duties and responsibilities of my station. You may or may not know that the Headmaster intervened in my placement after my parents' murder and left me with my maternal Aunt and her husband, both of whom are violently anti-magical. As such, I only learned of my status as one of the Fifteen two weeks ago from my lovely wife."

Lady Augusta's eyebrows furrowed and she frowned at the Headmaster's intervention with his placement. When Harry paused, she asked, "The Headmaster never informed you of your duty? But what did your parent's will read regarding your placement?"

Harry shook his head regarding her first question, then looked at her meaningfully and said, "He never said anything. I don't know about their will, I've never heard nor seen it."

There was a pregnant pause and when Lady Augusta straightened up slowly to her most perfect bearing and posture saying, "I see,"

Daphne knew they had her firmly on their side.

The discussion became much lighter and when they rose for coffee, Harry and Neville sat next to their respective ladies and Harry said, "Neville, Lady Augusta, I need your help."

"Anything, Harry. Name it," said the Longbottom scion.

Harry paused then said, "Dumbledore is crossing the line from helpful to interfering and blazing a path toward obstructionist."

Neville frowned while Lady Augusta gave a resigned look that implied she saw this problem coming. Harry gave him a brief description of his life, leaving Neville staring at his friend with a gaping mouth and Lady Augusta red faced.

"My Lord," she said with restrained, indignant anger. "I am completely at your service. How may I help you?"

Harry and Daphne smiled and shared a quick look. It was Daphne who answered, "My Lady, my husband and I are in need of guidance of our newfound roles in society and government. With your vast experience, would you consent to share your wisdom with us on a regular basis for our instruction?"

Lady Augusta sent a reproachful eye toward her grandson and then gave the Potters a smile saying, "I am honoured that you have asked me and am delighted to help. As I said earlier, I am at your disposal. Inform me of when you need my services and memories and I will make myself available."

Harry gave a small sigh of relief. He never really doubted that she'd help them, but it was always a surprise when someone actually extended their hand to help him instead of twinkle and spew platitudes; Daphne, Evelyn (or was it mum now?), George Stebbins, and now Augusta and Neville Longbottom had all helped him in

meaningful ways in the previous weeks and it still stunned him.

Harry began to stammer his thanks when his hand was covered by his wife's. "My husband is still overwhelmed with the situation and your offer is most welcome in many ways, my Lady. We have much instruction to attend in the forthcoming weeks, so I think that our sessions will be irregular, at best."

When Augusta waved that away as irrelevant, Neville piped up, "What instruction do you have scheduled?"

Harry sat back a moment and was clearly contemplating something meaningful. After a moment, he said, "Nev, when's your birthday?"

The Longbottoms blinked at the seeming non-sequitor and he said, "July 30, why?"

Harry nodded to himself and exchanged a glance with Daphne. She shrugged her shoulders in an "it's your choice" manner. Harry took a deep breath and said, "After our misadventure in the Department of Mysteries, Dumbledore portkeyed me back to his office. When he got there, he told me of a prophecy that was made before we were born."

Neville and Augusta were riveted on Harry while Daphne held his hand for support. "You see, I was born on the 31st of that year." He firmly took Neville's eyes into his own fierce look, ensuring he had his friend's undivided attention and said, "Dumbledore heard the prophecy and it goes like this:

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord shall mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not.... And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives...The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies...

"So you see, I need to get up to snuff right away. We've hired McGonagall, Flitwick and Lupin for extra tuition this summer."

There was complete silence throughout the Manor house and the Longbottoms looked at Harry in horror. "Harry, is it you or me?" Neville managed to choke out after a full minute.

Harry's only reaction was to lift his fringe and Neville exhaled explosively and nodded, "Right, marked as his equal."

Augusta finally broke out of her near trance-like state and rubbed her grandson's back. He gave her a weak smile and Harry said, "Neville, I have no doubt, that you could have not only been the prophesized one, but also succeeded in my task."

Neville looked at him skeptically, and to tell the truth, so too did Daphne and Augusta. Harry raised his hand to forestall argument and said, "You improved so rapidly this year in the DA it was amazing. You showed the overall best improvement of anyone in the entire club. Not only that, but you were the only one still standing with me at the end in the Veil Room. Not Hermione, not Ron. You."

Neville nodded, taking it all in. Augusta's eyebrows raised, her interest piqued. "What's this about the last ones standing?" She turned to Harry and said, "All Neville told me was that there was an altercation and he was helping you."

Harry smiled and Daphne could tell he was glad that he could tell the story that he knew Neville would never tell because of his modesty. "Well, it started with me getting a vision..."

.oOo.

They got home late that night and after they made love in slow, tender fashion, Harry held her as the moonlight spilled through the

window and across their bed. After a bit, Daphne said, "What's on your mind, love?"

"It's getting much more real for me now."

"The prophecy?"

She felt him nod his head but she could only love him, hold him, be by his side in martial and marital matters; and pray to all the gods in heaven and earth to protect her man. She fell asleep that night with a tear track on her left cheek.

.oOo.

10 July 1996

Their workout went a bit smoother this morning and they even finished their run without stopping. After showering (together), they ate breakfast in the family dining room as it had started to rain. They usually ate breakfast on the veranda when the weather was fine and Daphne liked that they had already developed a small Potter family tradition.

"Ah, Susan and her Aunt Amelia will be able to make it tonight," Harry said as he read the letter Dobby had set out for him.

Daphne was reading a few letters as well. In the first, Tracey updated her on the doings in the Davis household and her musings on the shifting of power at school due to the union of Greengrass and Potter.

With a hint of sadness, Daphne found she really didn't care about most of what Tracey had to say. Her life had changed so radically since the evening of the 30th of June, all of what Tracey had to say seemed so small and far away. It reminded her of when Phillip had tried to convey to her the seriousness of the day-to-day life of a nine

year old. To him, of course, his issues and problems were quite impressive and pressing. To Daphne, who'd seen a bit of the larger world, she saw his problems for what they were: the diminutive struggles of child. With a terrible sadness, she involuntarily felt the same way for what Tracey had written and it tore at her heart a bit.

Her words to Harry from the other day began ringing in her own ears and they were quite bitter, "Either she'll grow up, or I'll move on." It was much harder to be on the receiving end of that tidbit of wisdom.

In the second letter by her plate, Daphne read and then said to Harry, "Tracey's Uncle Duncan is back. He says he's available tomorrow evening to discuss Occlumency."

Harry nodded as he took a deep drink of orange juice. He drank pumpkin juice at school, but there was something deeply ingrained in him that found the idea of pumpkin juice to be quite nauseating. "Our nights are not our own, neither are our days, eh?"

Daphne nodded as she read before holding up the parchment saying, "He lists a book for us. I'll order two."

"Ask Dobby to go, he'll be faster."

She nodded and summoned the little elf. With a pop he appeared and Daphne had to remark to herself the change in their major domo. He'd calmed significantly and had taken to anticipating their needs in extraordinary fashion.

She'd never really paid attention to Matty, her family's house elf, but seeing Harry treat Dobby as a friend more than a servant made an impact on her. Making a small effort to befriend the little being had been more than what was required and Dobby was now as devoted to his mistress as much, or even more so, than his devotion to his 'Harry Potter Sir'.

After Daphne gave Dobby the name of the book, she said, "Thank you for doing this for us, Dobby."

The little elf had bowed deeply and with a smile of genuine warmth said, "It is being Dobby's pleasure, mistress." With a pop, he was gone.

They had an hour before Flitwick arrived during which Harry read more of the journal of the Potter Fifteen while Daphne finished Advanced Magical Combat. Amazing what a proper motivation can do for a person's reading and comprehension.

Therefore, it was when the diminutive Charms professor stepped out of the fireplace at exactly 0900, both Potters had their annotated and tabbed copies of Advanced Magical Combat under their arms and ready for the lesson.

With a smile, Flitwick said, "Good morning Mr. and Mrs. Potter. Are you ready to begin?"

"Yes, sir" said Harry. "We've set up a room to practice spellcasting or we can adjourn to or the library. Whichever you prefer."

Flitwick had a half smile and said, "Let's go to the library for a bit and then we can see your room." After a pause, he said, "How is your progress with your text?"

When both Harry and Daphne indicated they'd finished with the book, Flitwick mock-glared at Harry, saying, "And why have you never shown this level of effort during the school year?"

Harry gave a laugh and said, "Well, there's this Dark Lord, see? He wants my guts for garters, so..." and the three of them chuckled and took seats.

After they all settled and Dobby provided tea all around, Flitwick's



face became very serious. "Last we met, I told Mrs. Potter that I'd not be teaching you how to cast the Tickling charm but how to maim and kill. I wanted you two to seriously think about that and consider if you could do that. Have you?"

Harry nodded solemnly. He glanced at Daphne, who nodded and said, "We have, sir. In addition, we've talked about it with each other and we realize this is what's necessary. Only because of the infernal prophecy, that is. Without that, we'd be living private lives and let the Aurors take care of it. Since we must be involved, we'll fight."

Flitwick nodded to himself, seemingly more sad than anything. Looking at Daphne with a raised eyebrow she responded, "My husband spoke for both of us. I am in complete concurrence with everything he said."

"Very well." He hopped down from his seat and strolled to the door saying, "Let us proceed to your dueling room." As they walked, he explained, "I am going to review your form first. If you have flawless form, or nearly so, you can still cast when you have a broken arm or leg. Fighting through pain will be necessary, I'm sorry to say. You must expect to get hurt. You must expect each other to get hurt."

They entered the dueling room, Flitwick whipped out his wand, and before either could react, Daphne was lying on the floor, stunned.

Harry blinked and then ran to her. He was awakened a few moments later, sitting next to his wife, Flitwick standing over them with a disapproving look on his face.

"Mrs. Potter, you must always be ready for someone to attack you. Your husband is the Chosen One to defeat Voldemort, and as such, you are as valuable to the forces of Lord Voldemort as he is. Always be ready to cast a shield or evade the unexpected spell."

He shifted his disapproving gaze to Harry, "Mr. Potter, for the time

that I was casting, you had an unopposed opportunity to attack me and you wasted it gaping at me. When your wife was felled, you did not take the correct action and attack me, you wasted your own life to check on her."

He looked at them both and said, "This is not a game anymore, nor is it an academic exercise. This is a fight to the death and you must treat it as such. One of you may die. You don't have to like it and I would be stunned if you could find peace with the idea but you must behave as if it doesn't matter, else you both will die in a manner similar to what you just experienced. Alastor Moody is many things, but his cry of 'Constant Vigilance' is entirely appropriate for where you stand this day. Questions?"

Thus began their instruction in the noble art of Magical Combat under Grand Master Duelist Filius Flitwick, Master of Charms.

When reviewing basic combat spells: Disarming, Stunning, Binding, Bludgeoning, Reductor, Blasting and Cutting, Flitwick said:

"Repeat the wand movement one hundred times without casting. Then you may cast it one hundred more times. Form. You must have perfect form for all your spell work."

When covering the beginning of Advanced Magical Combat spells: Bone Breaking, Bone Exploding, Advanced Shield, Fire Whip and Blinding, Flitwick said:

"You must learn to cast without verbalizing the incantation. Developing this ability will take time, but I want you to practice casting all spells silently. Attempt to cast the spell, be it a combat spell or simple household spell twenty five times silently before giving up and verbalizing."

After pummeling Daphne repeatedly in a quick exchange of spells, he said:

"Move! If you stand still you will die. Stand on the balls of your feet and slide from side to side. Rush your opponent. Most magical persons avoid physical confrontations."

While taking a quick break and drinking some water, he offered his observation and levied tasking:

"The Unforgivable curses give your opponents a significant advantage. To negate it, Minerva will help you with conjuring, but I want you to focus on dodging. You will cast the Stinging hex at each other for fifteen minutes a day and the recipient can only dodge."

By the end of the two-hour double period, Harry and Daphne were sporting considerable welts and bruises, as the Pinching hex was Flitwick's favorite motivator, and both were panting in exertion.

He surveyed them for a moment and said, "You did well, considering your inconsistent Defense Against the Dark Arts instruction and your age. You have far to go, but much potential. Remember, my homework for you is to practice silent casting and the dodging exercises."

Whistling a jaunty tune, Flitwick saw himself out to the fireplace and Daphne sat next to Harry on the bench where he was sitting. She leaned her head on his shoulder and said, "Now we have McGonagall and after lunch Lupin." She could feel his empathetic shudder and they rested for a few minutes until they heard the Floo roar.

Harry helped his wife to her feet and they went to meet the Transfiguration Mistress in the entry hall.

Eschewing the library, Minerva led them back to the now dubbed 'Room of Pain' and conjured a seat for her to sit on. Before they said anything, McGonagall said, "Mr. Potter, I told your wife and I assume

she informed you. I wanted to express personally my extreme regret for failing you repeatedly through the years. Starting with your placement at your relatives through the debacle that was your fifth year, I find that I have failed you on multiple occasions and I shall endeavor to atone for my past mistakes and hope that someday you can find it in your heart to forgive me."

Harry digested what she said for a moment before nodding and said, "Professor, as I said to my wife, I do not ascribe malice to any of your errors, either great or small. I forgive you for the wrongs you have done me."

With a shining eye, McGonagall nodded and then shifted. It was time for instruction and she sat and looked at her students expectantly.

Figuring out that they were on their own for seats, Harry said, "Oh" and turned to drag the bench closer to the Professor. He was on the receiving end of a vicious Pinching hex to the back of his thigh for that.

When he whirled and glared at Minerva, she merely glared back and said in a derisive voice, "Are you a wizard or not? Conjure a chair yourself. You too Mrs. Potter. You may not conjure for each other."

Both teens looked at their feet for a moment before exchanging a glance. Daphne spoke up and said, "We don't know how to conjure chairs, Ma'am."

Nodding, McGonagall said, "You will by the end of the week."

She paused and said, "Transfiguration in magical combat is about controlling your environment. For example" and with a nimble wand movement, she conjured a lion behind the Potters.

Harry heard the growl and spun around, casting a silent Reductor curse before he even could think. The lion did not survive the

encounter. With a look of chagrin, Harry Vanished the remains of the beast.

"Excellent reaction with silent spellcasting Mr. Potter and it illustrates my point."

The Transfiguration Mistress waited for her students to deduce her meaning and after a few seconds Daphne's eyes lit up and she said, "While Harry was dealing with the conjured lion; he was defenseless to any attack from you. Also, if he ignored the conjured lion, it would have attacked from behind, incapacitating or even killing us."

"Very good. What's the drawback to the situation?"

Harry had this one and said, "You had to use time to conjure the lion. During that time, I could have been attacking you."

"Good" she said with a rare smile. "What else?"

Daphne said, "Well, most Transfiguration has complex wand movements that take time."

"Yes" McGonagall said as she rose and began her pacing that she invariably did while lecturing. "Therefore, you will need to increase the speed of your Transfiguration casting. Once you have the advantage, you can continue to use Transfiguration to attack and assault your enemy and then use a hex or curse to finish them off. Conjunction will be of great help, but there is a drawback."

"Power," Harry said without prompting. When McGonagall merely cocked an eyebrow, he continued, "Repeated conjunction can take a lot out of a person over a period of time."

"True. Therefore, your Transfiguration will be of even more help" and McGonagall transfigured the chair where she had been sitting into a rhinoceros.

This time Daphne cast a Stunning spell and dropped the beast in its' tracks.

McGonagall said, "Well done. I hope my point is made?" and transfigured the stunned rhino into an anaconda.

Harry smiled and hissed to the serpent in parseltongue, "Immobilize the old woman."

In a flash, the huge snake was wrapping itself around the older woman who glared and then transfigured the snake into rubber balls before it pinned her arms to her sides. She then banished the rubber balls at Harry, "Not amusing Mr. Potter."

Once she resettled herself on a new chair, McGonagall said, "The Fifth Universal Law of Transfiguration. What is it?"

Without a pause, Daphne said, "Any non-living, non-organic matter may be transfigured into a living, non-human being."

"Correct, and the incantation and wand movement?"

When both teens had demonstrated, McGonagall said, "What are the implications of this piece of magic for your case?"

After a moment, Daphne smiled and kicked off her shoe. With a deft flick of her wand, she attempted to cast the spell silently. Failing, she attempted twice more before transfiguring her shoe into a wolverine, which, after a quick Compulsion charm, charged McGonagall.

Stunning the wolverine, McGonagall canceled the transfiguration, leaving Daphne's shoe in the middle of the Room of Pain. "Exactly. Well done. The trick for this kind of application is one of timing, of course."

They began a long and intricate discussion of the uses of Transfiguration in a battle situation. Conjunction of physical shields to block the Unforgivables or to use as shields to hide behind and launch attacks, the use of apparition to gain a momentary advantage in time to allow for more complex conjurations and transfigurations and so on.

They found out quickly that McGonagall was a stickler for form, like Flitwick. After performing the wand movements for all nine of the Universal Laws one hundred times each, McGonagall said, "I want you to consider each Law and think up ten ways that you can use each Law in a Combat situation."

McGonagall had Dobby fetch some shingle from the beach, a few fallen tree branches and some bread from the kitchen.

For the next hour, the Potters started to remediate their first five years of Transfiguration, focusing on melding speed and form. At the end, McGonagall eyed her two students and then gave them a thin smile, "Well done for the day. We will continue tomorrow where we left off. Please have the same raw material present" and she walked out leaving the young couple to slump to the floor, leaning on each other.

Dobby popped in and said, "Master and Mistress would like lunch now?"

Harry nodded and pulled Daphne to her feet and they stumbled into the family dining room to bolt down turkey sandwiches and crisps.

Afterwards, they sat on the couch in the drawing room, Daphne snuggled up to Harry, muttered "I love you" and they promptly fell asleep.

This is exactly how Remus Lupin found them a half hour later. He had used the Floo to arrive in the entryway at one sharp. He was

greeted by Dobby who whispered, "Master Harry and Mistress Daphne is being asleep in the drawing room."

He smiled to himself, knowing that Minerva and Filius had worked over the couple. He took a short trip and ambled through the house, remembering the two times he had visited James here. They were good times and he gently shook Harry on the shoulder while wearing a gentle smile.

"Wakey, wakey" he taunted the sleepy teens.

When Harry and Daphne recovered consciousness to a suitable point, Remus straightened and said, "Meet me in the library five minutes."

As the Potters came in the double doors of the library, they saw two stacks of books on a worktable and Remus Lupin leaning on said table. "Sit" he beckoned and indicated the chairs.

"What we are going to do for today and tomorrow is read" and indicated the two stacks. "We are going to read the histories of Voldemort and his Death Eaters, as well as, the histories of Gellert Grindlewald and the Knights of Walpurgis. You will get a feel for the tactics and strategies that the two significant European Dark Lords of the last century have employed.

"Begin."

Daphne stifled a grin. At least I'm not getting that damn Pinching hex, nor getting my arse kicked.

A half hour later, she and Harry were both quite nauseous. They'd been reading about the atrocities the two dark lords and their cohorts had perpetrated. The Potters' lunches were sitting uneasily.

"Ok, let's talk about what you've read, shall we?" said Remus in a



chipper voice.

"Monsters" whispered Daphne.

"Exactly" said Remus in a hard voice, his smile rapidly fading to a glower. "Exactly right Mrs. Potter. They will do anything to anyone, no matter how depraved, immoral, repugnant or disgusting. There is nothing beyond the pale for these people and you'd best get used to that idea quickly.

"What I want you to do now, is continue reading and look for patterns in their behavior. Where skirmishes or battles are described, look for spell usage, troop coordination and the like."

They both nodded and went back to their reading.

After another half an hour, they stopped and Remus asked, "Well?"

Harry sat back and reached out for his wife's hand. "Well, it seems like there are two types of dark arts practitioners; the first is the Bellatrix Lestrangle and Lucius Malfoy type. Very capable and very dangerous in any situation. The others are the Crabbe, Goyle and Nott type; they use the Unforgivables a lot as they can barely cast the Color Changing charm."

Remus nodded and said, "The bulk of the Death Eaters and Knights of Walpurgis were and are thugs who could cast the Killing curse and the Cruciatus. The elite few, as you mentioned Lestrangle and Malfoy, are very capable. However, they all must be taken seriously, as the Killing curse from a moron like Alecko Carrow will kill you just the same as a Killing curse from Voldemort."

After a moment to consider, Remus waved his hand at the books and said, "What else?"

Daphne said, "They usually attack with significant numerical

superiority. Probably to offset quality of spellcasters."

Remus nodded and said, "So the lesson is?"

She responded, "Where I see one, there are five more waiting in the shadows."

"Good."

He surveyed them critically, no sense of Moony here, only Professor Lupin. Finally, he said, "Since the Death Eaters are playing to their strengths with the use of extreme dark arts and the Unforgivables, your response is to...?"

"Play to our strengths" said Harry.

"Which are?"

"Transfiguration for me" said Daphne.

"Charms" said Harry.

Nodding, Remus said, "Good, I'm glad you're aware of this. So you know what this means, don't you?" When he got no response from either, he said, "It means that Harry is going to put in extra time with Transfiguration, and you" he said to Daphne, "Will put in extra time with Charms."

When he got somewhat confused looks, he patiently said, "You will need to be well rounded in your use of magic in battle if you wish to survive. Relying on just Charms or just Transfiguration allows your enemy to counter you and then kill you. Therefore, you both will study extra hard in your weaker areas. Understand?"

Both their eyes lit up and gave him understanding nods. They talked a bit more before Remus said, "You two look all done in. Minerva,

Filius and I had a few chats over the weekend and they told me that they were going to beat on you so I'll let you go a little early. Get some rest and for the love of the heavens, do your homework."

Harry walked Remus to the Entry Hall fireplace while Daphne went for a shower. When she came out of the shower, she had to laugh as Harry had come upstairs, flopped on the bed face first, and not moved.

"A bit tired, love?"

He turned over and pulled her down to him. After she cuddled up, she said, "It was tiring, but fun."

Harry nodded and squeezed her shoulder, "What do you say we do our 15 minutes of dodging with our morning workouts?"

She nodded into his chest, after three attempts silently cast the spell to wake them at four thirty, and they both fell asleep.

.oOo.

The alarm went off on time and Daphne poked, prodded and bribed her husband awake and into the shower. Their guests were to arrive at six, so she went to check with Dobby that everything was on schedule before getting dressed.

She walked into the kitchen and was astounded. Dobby was a blur rushing from sink to counter to oven and back to sink. The asparagus was laid out on the cutting board, washed and trimmed. The potatoes were cleaned, diced and waiting to be roasted. One of the four ovens in the kitchen had what smelled like roast loin of pork while another had what could only be a heavenly chocolate something-or-another. Dobby was currently washing a cutting board he had obviously just used and was singing a song in his piping elfin voice.

He noticed her as he wiped off the cutting board and in a flash, the board was banished to its cupboard and he was next to her asking, "How can Dobby serve, Mistress?" He had a hopeful smile on his face as he gazed up at her.

"How goes the preparation for the meal?" She and Dobby had spent two hours planning the menu and china for the meal. Seating was easy enough, Susan would sit at Harry's right, Neville at Daphne's right and Amelia Bones at Harry's left. They were eating in the Grand Dining Room and were using the best linens, china and gold utensils. Hogwarts wasn't the only place in the magical world that used solid gold utensils it seemed.

A bit of the old excitement crept into Dobby's demeanor as he bounced a few times before saying, "Everything is as planned Mistress. Dobby is having no problems at all. The red wine is decanting and the white is chilling, the roast is cooking and the vegetables are almost ready for the pot." He looked at her a little shyly and said, "Master Harry is giving directions for the dessert and telling Dobby it is a surprise for Mistress."

Daphne gave Dobby a soft smile and said, "Thank you Dobby for making our first entertainment here at our home so wonderful."

Dobby gave a short sob and then threw himself at Daphne's knees for a moment before stepping back. He choked out, "Mistress is as great and noble as Harry Potter, sir. Is too much." He then jumped back to work, mopping a seemingly spotless corner of the kitchen.

With a smile, Daphne returned to the master suite and took a short shower. It only took her fifteen minutes to do her hair and after donning a blue silk robe with the Potter crest on her left breast, she walked out into the bedchamber.

She found Harry out on the balcony with a towel wrapped around his waist. His hair was wet and he was looking over the grounds toward

the mountains with a pensive expression.

She wrapped her arms around him from behind and said, "What vexes you, love?"

She could feel his body relax at her touch and he answered, "I'm not sure. So much has changed in the last two weeks and I feel utterly exposed and unequipped. Lady Augusta's tutoring should help but I still feel like a firstie getting on the Express for the first time."

He leaned back into her embrace and wrapped his arms backward, around her waist. He gave her bum a playful squeeze and said, "I guess I don't know what is coming next. Outside of the training we've set up, I have no idea what is next in the chute."

"You've got me," she said softly.

He turned in her embrace and pulled her to him, "Aye, I do."

.oOo.

They sat in the formal drawing room, talking away their nerves. Daphne was resplendent in soft gold colored, strapless dress robes. Harry was in the Wizarding equivalent of white tie tuxedo and was nervously watching the Louis XIV clock on the sideboard. Daphne put her hand on her husband's thigh and said, "Just be yourself, love. Harry Potter is a good man and you don't have to put on airs. There is some etiquette to follow, but you know Neville and Susan. Just be yourself."

At exactly six PM the fireplace roared. Harry remained seated, as Daphne had instructed him. It was Dobby's responsibility to see the guests from the Entry Hall into the Drawing Room. A moment later Dobby, wearing a miniature tuxedo, escorted the smiling figure of Neville Longbottom into the room. Dobby bowed the Longbottom scion into the room before disappearing

Harry stood, with a smile, said, "My Lord Longbottom", and gave him a well-executed bow – his first.

Neville smiled and said, "My Lord Potter, Lady Potter" and returned the courtesy.

Harry flopped down on the couch and said, "Ok, that's over" causing Neville to laugh as he sat in a wingback chair.

At that point, the fireplace roared again, twice in close succession. Harry looked at Daphne and said, "Game time."

Dobby bowed Susan and Amelia Bones into the room. Susan had her strawberry-blond hair piled high on her head in a style similar to Daphne while Amelia had her hair in a braid wound about the back of her head. Both were dressed in elegant dress robes and even from across the room, Daphne could see Susan's Head of House ring on her right hand. Harry and Neville both rose and Harry said, "Lady Bones, Director Bones; welcome to Rowan Hill."

Susan glanced at Harry's right hand, saw his Head of House ring on his right hand and then turned her attention to Neville and saw him wearing the ring of House Longbottom.

With a wry smile, Susan curtsied in return of Harry's bow and said, "My Lord Potter, the pleasure is ours." She smiled and said, "My Lord Longbottom" to which Neville bowed to her and then she smiled at Daphne and said "Lady Potter."

They all took their seats and the topic of conversation of course became Harry and Daphne's marriage. Daphne and Susan chatted like the teenage girls they were and after telling the story of Harry's arrangement of the marriage contract, the three women looked at Lord Potter with a mock glare until they all laughed.

Susan picked up the story with some of the news in society that she had gathered at some dinner parties she'd attended in the last week or so. "Most everyone is expecting you to assume the mantle of Lord Potter and Lord Black. Based on tonight, I assume that is correct?"

Harry took a sip of his champagne and nodded. "Potter is senior, but I am the Earl of Potter and Viscount Black. It's one of the reasons I've invited you over tonight. First, I'd like to get to know you better. We worked well together in the DA, but I've only just now come to know about my status as head of two of the Fifteen. Between the three of us," Harry indicated to Susan, Neville and himself, "We are a majority vote of the Fifteen. Since we all get along fairly well and are like minded when it comes to the conduct of the struggle with Voldemort, I thought it would behoove us to become better acquainted."

Amelia's eyes widened and Daphne could almost see the older woman's thoughts in the air. She was realizing the power that sat in the room under the guise of three rising Sixth Years.

Susan was very interested and considered the news. "Ever since my parents died when I was one, Aunt Amelia" here she indicated the older woman, "has raised me to be the Head of House Bones and one of the Fifteen. Very rarely has one of the Fifteen been female and I know I have an uphill battle in some arenas because of it. "

Daphne figuratively sat back and thought, However, for Susan to ally herself with House Potter, Black and Longbottom, three of the oldest of the Fifteen, well... It would help her in her duties significantly. It didn't hurt that she got along well with Harry and Neville. On top of that, Daphne saw some of the looks she was giving Neville.

The talk lightened for a bit, allowing Neville and Susan to digest the implications of Harry's words. Shortly, Dobby popped in and announced dinner and Harry escorted Susan and Amelia, while Neville escorted Daphne.

The dinner was full of laughter as both Susan and Neville told stories about Harry's exploits from their own perspective. Some topics were purposefully avoided; the Triwizard Tournament and the aftermath being the prime example.

"...and Hannah comes running into the common room screaming about Potter killing a basilisk with his bare hands to save the school."

Amelia chuckled, but Harry, Daphne and Neville just looked at their plates before Harry said, "I used a sword."

The two Bones' goggled at their host. Amelia finally regained use of her vocal chords and said, "You really killed a basilisk at the school?" When Harry nodded, the Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement said, "The Headmaster never reported it."

When Harry scoffed, Director Bones said, "Are there more things that the Headmaster didn't report?"

After Harry gave a quick summary of his first five years including the power-limiting ward, he noticed that Amelia had quietly conjured parchment and a self-inking quill and was taking notes. At the end, she said in a quiet, kind voice, "My Lord, I know this dinner party had quite another purpose, but may I see the back of your hand?"

When he showed her the scarring due to the blood quill, her face hardened and said, "Right, then. Thank you. I may have to call you to the Ministry as a material witness and take a statement. Would you be open to that?"

From the foot of the table, Daphne said, "He will come when you call, Madame Bones." With a small smile, Amelia inclined her head.

Harry sat back after the main course and sipped his water before saying, "Madam, I intend on making waves shortly. I hope to have Minister Fudge removed before the month is out. Voldemort has



been building and consolidating his power unchecked for a year now and he must be dealt with. I think you'd agree that Fudge is not the man to do that."

With an un-ladylike snort, Amelia said, "I've long been dissatisfied with that moron Fudge. The man has all the imagination and intelligence of a burnt stick. The potential for real change in this room is very interesting."

Daphne said, "If Fudge goes, you are the logical successor. Voldemort is a monster, but not stupid. He will come for you."

Amelia nodded and Harry said, "I recommend upgrading your wards." He looked at Neville and said, "Green Hills as well. The package we purchased from Phalanx in Diagon Alley is nigh on unbreakable. It's everything short of the Fidelius."

Amelia nodded, considering. "I've had these talks before. My Head Auror has been telling me this since your little expedition to the Department of Mysteries."

Neville now stepped in and said, "Would you risk Susan's life?"

Raising her hands, palms out, Amelia said, "I surrender. I'll talk to the warders tomorrow."

Daphne stood and the party moved to the Drawing Room for coffee. When they were all settled, Harry smiled and said to Amelia, "This may sound odd, but what do you need to fight the war?"

"More. I need more Aurors; I need more disposable funds for supplies like armor and invisibility cloaks. I need more control over the rules of engagement. I need more."

Harry nodded and said, "I hope this isn't rude, but Susan, Neville, would you please join me on the balcony for a minute?"

Daphne smiled and winked at him. This was exactly as they discussed and she surreptitiously cast a listening charm on her husband to hear the conversation while chatting with Amelia about various items.

Harry closed the French doors behind him and turned to his classmates saying, "Guys, for a minute, let's put the Fifteen and other such off to the side and look at us. We're all orphans because of Voldemort and his ilk. I don't want my kids or your kids to be orphans as well. We're all friends, and I'd like to become better friends. We all want a better life for ourselves and our future children and are willing to work together to achieve that goal."

Neville leaned on the handrail and looked from Harry to Susan. Finally he said, "I think we can railroad quite a bit through, Harry, but it would help to have a cooperative Ministry and Wizengamot."

Susan nodded and said, "The graft is still very real in the non-Fifteen Wizengamot voters. Malfoy and his kind have real power."

"I've been wondering, why haven't the Fifteen cleaned up this crap before?"

Susan answered without hesitation, "Fear. Fear of retribution on a family member. The new rich like the Malfoys and the Notts have often killed members of the Fifteen out of retaliation."

Neville nodded in concurrence and Harry thought a minute. "I won't bow to them. I won't bow when the bastards are in front of me with a wand and I won't bow when it's in the political sphere. What about you guys?"

Neville stood tall, taller than Harry had ever seen him and Longbottom of Longbottom said, "I won't bow."

"Neither will I" said Susan.

"Then the Orphans stand together." They all smiled at that. After a moment, Harry said to Susan, "I wasn't kidding, I have every intention of seeing your Aunt as Minister before Neville's birthday. I'll need your guys help, because I have no idea how to make it happen."

Neville said in a low voice, "We'll need to get her the resources she needs."

After a moment, Harry motioned to the doors and said, "Let's rejoin my wife and the Director before they take over the world with twenty Galleons, a house elf and four nifflers."

The other two laughed and as Harry opened the door, Susan said, "So, Neville, when is your birthday?"

The balance of the evening was in much higher spirits and around ten, Neville rose and began to make his farewells. After bowing over Daphne's hand and shaking hands with Harry, he turned to Susan. She gave him her hand, which he bowed over, and then he said in a rush, "Are you busy tomorrow? We have a new horse that I'm breaking in and wondered if you'd like to go riding?"

Susan faintly blushed and said, "I'd like that very much. Ten?"

Neville smiled broadly and said, "Ten it is. Green Hills is our Floo address."

After Neville used the Floo, Daphne smiled wickedly at Susan and Harry whistled while looking at the ceiling. "Oh stop it you two" Susan said with a fierce blush that only a redhead can achieve. "And you too Auntie" she snapped at Amelia who had a broad grin.

A smiling Amelia Bones said, "Lord Potter, it has been a wonderful

and informative evening, we must do this again, soon."

"Yes, we will, thank you for coming Director."

Amelia flung in the Floo powder and called out "Oak Park Hall!" but the flames did not turn the characteristic green. She did it again with no response. Turning to her niece, she said, "Wait here. I'm going to go get an Auror squad and investigate. My Lord, may I intrude on your hospitality a bit longer for my niece?"

"Of course. We'll be in the drawing room," said Daphne.

An hour later, a soot stained Amelia Bones returned to Rowan Hill. After a quick Cleaning charm she sat down and said to Susan, "I'm sorry dearest, the house is burnt to the ground. Voldemort came sooner than we thought he would."

A/N

1. I own nothing.
2. Thanks to all those who took the time to review. Our vacation was fantastic and we are all rested, tanned and ready to get back to the grind.
3. Regarding Neville as Lord Longbottom. I never really found a good spot to put it into the chapter without sounding stilted, but there is a succession law in place that stipulates that if a Head of House is permanently incapacitated (greater than 7 years), then the heir succeeds to the Lordship of the House. This is why Neville is Lord Longbottom and not his father.
4. The Universal Laws of Transfiguration as I see they could be:
  1. non-living (non-organic) to non-living (non-organic)

e.g. basalt rock into steel chain

2. non-living (non-organic) to non-living (organic)

e.g. railroad spike into wooden bucket

3. non-living (organic) to non-living (non-organic)

e.g. match into needle

4. non-living (organic) to non-living (organic)

e.g. bread into teapot

5. non-living (non-organic) to living (non-human)

e.g. pincushion into porcupine; teapot into tortoise

6. non-living (organic) to living (non-human)

e.g. tree into giraffe

7. living (non-human) to non-living (organic/non-organic)

e.g. parrot into plate

8. non-living (organic/non-organic) to living (human) [restoration only]

e.g. reversal of any human transfiguration

9. living (human) to non-living/living (organic/non-organic)

e.g. human being into bone. I see the animagus transformation as an extension of the ninth Universal Law.

## Chapter 5

11 July 1996

After their workout, Harry and Daphne went to the Room of Pain for their dodging exercises. Daphne said, "I'll dodge first." She tucked her wand into the back of her shorts, stretched to loosen up and then nodded to Harry that she was ready.

Harry started a timer and then cast four quick Stinging hexes, all wide of the mark. Daphne stood straight and glared at him. "Dammit Harry, this is for real! Cast at me!" With a look of chagrin, he reset the timer and started again, this time aiming for his wife.

By the time the timer sounded with a loud "Ding!" Daphne had seven welts on her legs and six on her arms. She drew her wand and cast the counter-curse to get rid of the painful wheals. Grimacing, she said, "Didn't do very well, did I?"

Harry looked at her with a confused expression, "I cast over one hundred hexes and you got hit with ten or fifteen. That's actually pretty good."

Considering it from this perspective, she nodded and said, "Ok, husband, get ready."

When they came down to breakfast on the veranda, they found Susan wearing a pair of Daphne's sweat suits. Holding up the Prophet, Susan said, "Made the headlines."

**BONES MANOR BURNT DOWN: DEATH EATERS RESPONSIBLE**

Below the fold was a smaller header.

**POTTER, BONES AND LONGBOTTOM HEADS MEET**

Harry gave Daphne a crooked grin that made her knees weak. He ran his hands through his hair and said, "Well. I've never seen someone have two headlines in the same paper. Congratulations, Susan."

Susan gave him a disgruntled glare and shot him the bird before returning to her breakfast.

Daphne plated up her own breakfast and as she crossed to the table said, "So, Sue, where's your Aunt?"

"She went in to work early. She had to arrange the solicitors and review what exactly we have insured. I've got to meet with them tomorrow as I actually owned everything." She looked down, her eyes shining.

Daphne reached out her hand and held Susan's. "You are welcome to stay here as long as you need. Years if need be." Harry nodded around his mouthful of eggs.

Susan wiped her eyes and said, "Thanks, guys. That means a lot. I think I'll take you up on your offer, though I need to go shopping today for some clothes."

"If you can wait until about three, I'll go with you," Daphne offered. Susan looked at her inquisitively. After exchanging a glance with Harry, who nodded, Daphne said, "Flitwick will be here at nine and McGonagall at eleven for some extra tuition. Lupin comes after lunch."

With a befuddled expression, Susan looked back and forth between the Potters. "You two don't need remediation, why the extra tuition?"

Daphne looked to Harry; this was his secret to tell. He looked at his tea for a long moment before he looked up at Susan. In that moment, he looked like he was thirty years older. Daphne could have sworn

she saw flecks of grey in his hair.

"There's a prophecy" he began heavily. "It says that only I can kill Voldemort." He indicated to his wife and continued, "Since she's foolish enough to love me, we've been training up to try and be ready as best we can. If we ever can be ready."

Susan looked at Harry with no pity, but rather an evaluating expression. After a long moment she said, "Good."

This rocked both Harry and Daphne back on their figurative heels. "Huh?"

"Harry, if there's anyone I know that I trust with that task, it's you. Not Dumbledore, not the Aurors. I trust you."

After a long moment, Harry said, "Thank you Susan."

"You're welcome. I'd like to participate in your training."

Harry just stared at her, the surprises overloading him for the moment. Daphne chuckled at him and said, "It's a good idea, love. She'll have need to be able to defend herself with her wand as well as politically, especially now that you three are going to try and turn 'the way things are done' on their ear."

After a minute Harry shrugged, "If they allow it, it's Ok with me."

.oOo.

After explaining the situation, the three instructors were amenable to Susan attending the instruction as well. Flitwick mentioned inviting Neville into the study group using the same logic as they did for Susan. The beating continued in Charms and Transfiguration, while Susan added a fresh perspective in their discussions with Remus. Growing up exposed to the DMLE, she thought about law and order



operations versus the more military perspective of seek and destroy that Harry and Daphne had discussed the day before.

After their session with Lupin finished Daphne and Susan apparated to Diagon Alley to shop for robes. Harry had kissed Daphne goodbye saying, "Remus and I are going to have some coffee and swap stories for a bit. We'll be in the study."

Susan started to purchase robes aplenty to replace what had been lost. As she held up a dark blue robe to Susan, Daphne asked, "Will you rebuild Oak Park Hall?"

Susan made a face and said, "I'm not sure. I'll have to arrange a loan with the Goblins to finance that effort. Oak Park was roughly the same size and splendor as Rowan Hill; it's not easy just to write a cheque for that amount.

Daphne tapped her finger and said, "Come on, let's pay for this and get out of here. I want to take you to a muggle store that Harry took me. It's called Harrods."

.oOo.

The ladies returned home with handbags bulging with shrunken purchases. It was around six thirty, so Susan went up to her room to change for dinner while Daphne went in search of her husband.

She found him in the study with Neville. Harry was standing and waving his hands in the air with a big smile on his face, while Neville sat on the leather couch laughing.

"Hey there boys, not getting into too much trouble?"

Harry crossed the room and gave her a kiss before saying, "I was telling Neville about one time Hermione was all in a tizzy that I was breaking school rules, never mind that Voldemort was trying to kill

me at the time. How'd it go with Susan?"

"It went well, we bought her enough clothes to get by. Most of her jewelry and whatnot was either in her vault or is going to be recovered from the fire site." When Harry looked at her blankly, she rolled her eyes and said, "Anti-fire charms. Protects jewelry from fire damage."

They all chatted for a bit before Susan joined them. Daphne noticed Neville's attentiveness and slight blush before he said, "I talked with Gran this morning about getting Fudge replaced."

He had the attention of the other three and he continued, "She advised a joint interview with the Prophet to get things moving." When the other three looked thoughtful, he pressed on, "I told her how you called us the Orphans, and she encouraged us to make that point in the course of the interview, to call out how Voldemort and his atrocities have personally impacted us. Gives us the moral high ground."

Susan asked, "What do you think?"

Neville said, "I think the idea has merit. I'm a little uncomfortable talking about such personal topics in public, but I think it's a good idea. Technically I'm not an orphan, but for all intents and purposes, I am."

Harry looked at his wife and said, "Daph? Thoughts?"

Slowly, she said, "It depends on the interviewer. Due to your status, you three could demand whomever you want to do the interview, which should help. You want the resulting story to come across as sympathetic to your childhood experiences, but still dealing with you as adults so your opinions on Fudge hold more weight. Insist on using your titles; even refer to each other by such during the interview." She tapped her chin as she thought of different ideas.

Shaking her head, Daphne said, "I'm sure more will come to me later."

"Susan?"

Obviously thinking aloud, the redhead said, "The main thrust of the interview would be the controlling majority of the Fifteen expressing their collective displeasure with the Minister and their desire for him to be replaced, posthaste." Glancing at Harry she said, "You may have to play up the whole 'boy-who-lived' aspect."

Harry frowned and then nodded in resignation. Slowly his frown dissolved into a look of mischief. With a smile he said, "I like it. Let's do it."

They left the study, moving to the family dining room for dinner and from behind, Daphne heard Susan say, "I'm sorry we couldn't go riding this morning."

"Oh, I quite understand. Please, don't worry about it, thank you for the note you sent." Neville paused a bit before saying, "Perhaps we could reschedule?"

Daphne could almost hear Susan's smile as she said, "I'd like that very much Neville."

Wrapping her arm in Harry's, Daphne smiled at her husband, only to have the smile returned with a knowing look.

.oOo.

It turned out that both Susan and Neville had been practicing Occlumency since first year. As Heads of Fifteen families, both Amelia and Lady Augusta had insisted they start early on the mind art.

Therefore, Harry and Daphne were alone when the fireplace roared green and Duncan Davis gingerly stepped out. Neville had returned home to start reading Advanced Magical Combat and Susan had some correspondence to attend. Harry rose and said to the old man, "Welcome Mr. Davis to our home. We would like to thank you for any and all help you bring."

Daphne smiled to herself, the etiquette discussions were beginning to take hold and bear fruit.

Duncan Davis was a wiry old man with wispy, flyaway white hair that was rapidly receding from his forehead. His slightly protuberant eyes were the darkest Daphne had ever seen they were almost black.

"Oh, nonsense, young man. I haven't done anything yet. Let's go someplace quiet and comfortable to you both."

They went to an informal Drawing Room and Davis steered each Potter into their own chair, away from the couch they were both heading.

After he settled himself on a loveseat, he regarded his new students with a kindly eye. A full minute passed until he said, "Well, then. Let's begin. First of all, I had you sit separately because Occlumency is a solitary exercise and you will do best by physically separating yourself at the beginning. Later, as your skills progress, you'll be able to call on your mental shielding while holding hands, or at a dinner party or anywhere, really. However, for now, we'll begin in isolation. Easiest on the concentration, you see."

Mr. Davis went on to explain about the basics of Occlumency, "What you will end up with is a mental shield of magic, similar to the more well known Basic Shield spell that uses the incantation Protego. Occlumency is a type of wandless magic, so there will be quite a bit of meditation in order for the two of you to be able to 'touch' your magic as it were. It's very similar to the Animagus transformation or

shapeshifting, in that you will need to be able to access your magic at all times and due to the nature of the practice, a wand is not used.

"At the same time, there are exercises that you will need to do so as to be able to maintain a mind shield, or Occlumatic Shield, at all times. For example, it would be very difficult to keep up a levitation charm twenty-four hours a day. Fortunately, the Occlumatic Shield is a very low power spell. Then again, so too is the Legilimency spell. What is most tiring is the effort expended in concentration, not in the expenditure of magic."

Harry was getting angrier by the minute. Daphne laid a calming hand on his arm and he took a deep breath before exhaling loudly.

Davis obviously noticed this interchange and asked, "Is something amiss?"

In short choppy phrases, Harry explained Snape's 'lessons' of the previous year. Davis was horrified and said, "My Lord, I am most sorry that you were subjected to such torture under the guise of Occlumency, for torture it was."

After a long pause, Davis explained the first of the exercises, called *Magicus Intimus*, roughly translated as 'find your magical self'. After a fifteen-minute explanation, both Potters attempted the meditation after Davis cast "*Expiscor Magicus Vorto*" at both of them "It will assist you in the meditative process. With experience and skill it will eventually no longer be needed."

Daphne felt like a black velvet curtain dropped in front of her eyes blocking out her vision. Far in the distance, she barely heard a repetitive noise. Focusing and reaching out with her hearing proved fruitless as the noise was as elusive as before, remaining just out of reach.

Might as well try my hands, so with her mind she imagined herself

reaching out to the noise, as if it were a glowing white sphere. She willed herself to possess this sphere, to pull it close to her breast and cradle it as if it were her child.

The noise came a little closer and Daphne thought it might be a drum of some kind, but couldn't really tell.

She reached out with her sight, trying to see the noise into existence. Imagining that the noise was still the glowing white sphere, she tried to will it into her interior sight. The noise became slightly clearer and now she was almost certain it was a drum of some kind.

Now Daphne considered something she'd only read about. She knew that she was a powerful witch; she'd knocked Theodore Nott across the Slytherin Common room in second year with a disarming spell. The technique that she was attempting, she called 'seeing with your magic' and only very powerful witches and wizards could attempt it.

She imagined her whole body standing in the plane of darkness and willed her magic out of her fingertips, like water leaking out of a hose when the valve isn't closed tight enough. Her magic pooled and coalesced before she sent it out in a great wave, commanding it to find and retrieve this elusive noise.

With a start, she awoke from the trance and realized she was exhausted. Sweat dripped from her brow and her body felt as if she'd just run ten miles. Panting slightly, she looked to Harry and saw him in the same state. Mr. Davis was replacing his wand in his sleeve and he said, "Well done. You've both made significant strides. I'll be back next week at the same time. In the meantime, I want you both to practice this meditation every day for a half-hour. Do so one at a time, as I want the non-meditator to rouse the other at the half-hour mark with a simple Ennervate. Questions?"

.oOo.

After seeing Mr. Davis out, Harry and Daphne headed outside and took a silent walk through the grounds, hand-in-hand. At the ornamental gates that led to the stairs down to the beach, Harry leaned on the wall and pulled Daphne close.

"It feels like we haven't had any time to ourselves today."

She leaned back against him, looking at the stars. "That's because we haven't."

A dry chuckle came from behind her. "Ok, smarty-pants." After a long pause, an emotion choked Harry nuzzled the back of her neck and said, "I love you, Daphne. I'm glad we're doing all this. It gives me hope that we can make it."

"We will, love. We will."

.oOo.

12 July 1006

The next morning, Harry and Daphne raced the last mile of their run. Daphne beat her husband by a stride, which led to some low level crowing on her part. Therefore, it was that a sweating and smiling Harry and Daphne Potter walked up the steps to of the veranda to find Dobby waiting for them.

The fact that Dobby was there was not unusual. Unlike most homes with house elves, the Potter household did not banish their elves from sight unless summoned. What was odd was Dobby's behavior.

Since bonding with the House of Potter, Dobby calmed significantly and his genuine contentment and happiness was evident. Today, he looked like he did the day Harry first met him; unhappy, bouncing on his feet, wringing his hands and even ears from time to time and averting his eyes.

Harry and Daphne stopped abruptly when they saw him behaving this way. After exchanging a questioning look with each other, they looked to Susan and Amelia who were eating their breakfast and reading the paper.

Susan shrugged and said, "He was fine until five minutes ago when he popped in and has just been waiting since."

Harry approached and said, "Dobby, what's wrong?"

Dobby said, "Dobby doesn't want to say. Master and Mistress is so good to Dobby."

"Dobby, we won't hold bad news against you, what's wrong?" Daphne asked as she knelt in front of him.

"The nasty Headmaster is being here."

Harry stood up straight and his face went slack. "Where?" he asked flatly.

Dobby looked at his hands and said, "He tried to have firebird bring him to the house, but wards bounced him to the front gate. Firebird made it through, but not nasty Headmaster. Dobby went and asked his business. The nasty Headmaster said he wanted to talk to Master."

Harry's eyes unfocused and then he came back. A soft smile graced him lips and he gently placed his hand on Dobby's shoulder saying, "You did well, Dobby. Thank you."

Dobby nodded and popped away.

Harry took a deep breath, steeling himself for the upcoming encounter. Daphne said, "I'm coming with you, don't argue."



With a smile he said, "Yes, dear."

Daphne had a mischievous expression, filled two mugs with tea and handed one to Harry.

Amelia had an unreadable expression when she asked, "Harry, would you mind if I cast a Listening charm on you to listen in from afar?"

Harry nodded and after a quick wand flick from the Director, the Potters made their way down the main path that in days of yore had been a carriage path. They had only walked this path once before, so they went slowly, holding hands and sipping their tea. Halfway from the house to the gates, the house's namesake became clear. Four rows of Rowan trees stood sentry on either side of the avenue, arms upraised in salute.

Daphne squeezed Harry's hand in reassurance, and he replied with a smile.

All too soon, the walk ended and they stood at the gates to the estate. There was a ten foot high stone wall that ringed the landward boundaries of Rowan Hill and this was one of two penetrations in the wall. The gates were actually made in Germany in the early 1800's by a master magical metalworker. An unnatural alloy of gold and iron, they were magnificently beautiful with incredible strength. Attached to the bars of each gate was the Potter crest.

Through the gates, Daphne could see the aged Headmaster sitting on a plush chair, his head bent in thought, concentration or sleep; she couldn't tell which.

As they approached and the gates opened at Harry's wave of a hand, the old man raised his head, smiled and stood, vanishing the conjured chair as he did so. Before Dumbledore could do anything,

Harry spat out, "What do you want?"

Harry and Daphne stopped walking well within the estate's ward boundary, Dumbledore obviously on the outside of the wards. The scene was reminiscent of an American Western where the good guys wearing white hats met on one side of Main street and stared down the bad guys wearing their black hats on the other side of the street.

Daphne put a soothing hand on his lower back and Harry took a calming breath. "My apologies, Headmaster. What can I do for you today?"

Dumbledore's face went from the practiced geniality to shock at Harry's hostile greeting and ending at confusion after watching the Potters' interaction.

"I'm here to take you to Headquarters, Harry. You know your vital role in the struggle with Voldemort. You must be kept safe."

Harry's face turned red and he said, "It would be best if you addressed me as Lord Potter or my Lord, Headmaster."

Dumbledore's face dropped and he started to say something, but was cut off by an increasingly irate son of Prongs. "Regarding my safety, if you couldn't get through the wards here riding pig-a-back on a Phoenix, who could get in?" Harry seemed to reconsider and waved his hand in an angry chopping motion saying, "On second thought, don't answer that. Let's talk about other wards, shall we?"

Dumbledore's face paled. He was caught and all three knew it. "You are, of course, referring to the Power Limiting ward that I cast at your Aunt and Uncle's home."

Harry didn't even reply, just glared at the Headmaster while Daphne was exerting an incredible amount of self-will to keep from attacking the man.

After a long moment, during which Dumbledore stood there looking at Harry with a sad expression, Harry barked "Go on, give me the perfectly reasonable explanation why you used a ward on my place of residence that would affect me year round, that could have killed me if it was minutely out of focus, much less when it failed. Tell me why it was an appropriate course of action to use a tool on me that is normally used on dragons and manticores. Please, tell me why this is all Ok, Professor 'It's time for me to tell you everything'."

Dumbledore sighed which enraged Daphne further. He had no right to play the victim. "Don't you do it" she spat and jabbed her finger at him. "Don't you turn this around on Harry. It isn't his fault that you put him in that hellhole to be hurt so badly, it isn't his fault that you cast those blood wards there, it isn't his fault that you cast a bloody fucking Power Limiting ward!"

To his credit, Dumbledore did not interrupt either of the Potters and let them vent their rage. So far, it had not devolved into name-calling, but Daphne was on the verge of taking that plunge.

"I'm waiting," said Harry in a tone that could freeze water.

"As I told you at the end of term, I knew the Dursleys were highly offensive people. I believed that I would be helping you with the Power Limiting ward, as it would reduce your bouts of accidental magic as you grew up. Your parents had informed me that you had already experienced accidental magic before the age of one, which you may or may not know, is highly unusual. If your accidental magic occurrences were eliminated or at least minimized, I believed the Dursleys would treat you better; possibly even accept you as part of their family. I truly felt that I was aiding you."

Harry looked at the aged man incredulously. "You really believe that," he murmured. Dumbledore nodded to him with a sad expression. "Then why did you withhold that information from me. I distinctly

recall the words 'I am now going to tell you all I know' coming from you not that long ago and a Power Limiting ward was not included in the discussion."

Harry paused and then in a dangerous tone said, "Don't tell me it's because you love me too much. I now know what true love feels like and it isn't about manipulation and deceit. It's about honesty and giving." He was breathing hard, like a horse after a hard run. Nostrils flared, his eyes were wide and if Daphne didn't know better, she would have sworn Harry was about to go into battle.

"It goes back to my original premise; I believed you were best served by living there. You would be out of the spotlight, have the best wards ever cast and also have anonymity in the non-magical world that you know you would never have had in the magical world." Dumbledore spread his empty hands wide in semi-supplication.

A red-faced Daphne came unglued, "THEY ALMOST KILLED HIM!" When Dumbledore physically recoiled from her words, she took a deep breath she said, "Those fucking monsters that you left my husband with almost killed him. How many other times did they just hurt him? You stupid bastard, I don't think Harry even knows." She glared at the old man and stalked up to the edge of the boundary and hissed, "I hold you responsible Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore and I will have an accounting from you. So I say so, let it be so."

Dumbledore's eyes widened at her invocation of the ancient ways. She was effectively calling a blood feud on him and his house until his guilt was publicly acknowledged. If she were the head of house, House Potter and House Black would have been at war with House Dumbledore.

Picking up on her language, Harry said, "Do you want a blood feud old man? If that's what you want, I'll oblige you."

Looking very old, Dumbledore said, "No, my Lord, I do not want a blood feud." Looking at Daphne he said, "My Lady, would a public admission of my poor choices suffice?"

Taking a deep breath before she spoke, Daphne said, "Poor choices. That's what you think this is about, poor choices on your part? From what Harry has told me, you could be jailed for up to fifteen years in the non-magical world for what you have done. You have not made poor choices, Headmaster. You have made criminal choices."

Dumbledore flinched at the last and in a shaking voice Harry said, "I believe an admission of your illegal interference in the execution of my parents will regarding my guardianship, admission of your illegal casting of a Power Limiting ward on my place of residence, admission of your illegal – at least in the non-magical world – abetting chronic child abuse and admission of your willful suppression of my position. Admission of these behaviors of yours at the next Wizengamot session where I will claim my seats will avoid a blood feud. I will also agree to refrain from prosecuting you on these crimes."

Dumbledore looked Harry in the eye, his twinkle gone for many minutes now. "You ask for much, my Lord."

"And you have taken much!" Daphne snarled.

Dumbledore thought for a moment and then said, "May I consider before answering? I will write you by the end of the week with my reply if that will do?"

Harry nodded, pulled back and turned as if to walk away. Daphne went to his side and saw that he was visibly pulling himself together. After a moment, he took a few fortifying drinks of his tea, gave her a quick smile and turned around again.

Daphne took her turn and said, "Why did you withhold the duties and

responsibilities as Lord Potter from Harry?"

"I felt it would be an unnecessary complication in his life."

Dumbledore said it with such a straight face; Daphne gawked at him in a most unladylike manner for a minute. She narrowed her eyes and all her resentment and hostility bled out when she said, "How was this your decision to make?"

"Harry needed to stay at his relatives. The blood wards were the best protection from the straggled remnants of Voldemort's supporters. Before he was five, seven Death Eaters were stopped by the wards."

Daphne held firm, "That's nice. You didn't answer the question."

Dumbledore didn't respond and Daphne waved her hand at him, dismissing him.

"Since I'll not be accompanying you to another property of mine this day, is there any other business we need to discuss?"

"Harry..."

"Lord Potter."

Dumbledore braced himself and said, 'Quite. My Lord, there is much to do, and it would best be done from Headquarters.'

Harry looked at Daphne and then back to the Headmaster, "What business?"

Dumbledore's eyes cut to Daphne and then back to Harry. "Quite a bit, my Lord."

Harry rolled his eyes at the implication. Obviously, Dumbledore wanted to try to dissolve his marriage to Daphne. "You can leave now,

Headmaster, we have nothing further to discuss. If you attempt to meddle with my marriage, I will ensure you are in Azkaban for the rest of your life. I will inform you if we decide to return to Hogwarts for our sixth and seventh years, at this time, we shall not."

With a look of panic, Dumbledore almost shouted, "But Harry, you must finish your education. You will be nigh on defenseless if you don't."

Ignoring the self-centered worldview of the old man, Harry said, "Oh, and you have a month to vacate Black Manor. Find another roost for the Order. I'll not enable your ego feeding, useless endeavors any longer. If your vigilante group actually accomplished anything, I'd be more disposed to allow you to continue using my godfather's ancestral home as your 'Headquarters'. However, since the Order has never done anything that I am aware of, be out by the twelfth of August."

"My Lord..."

"Good day, Headmaster." Harry dumped his now cold tea on the ground between himself and Dumbledore, offered his wife his arm and they slowly began walking back to the house, leaving the vanquished Headmaster as a beggar at the gates.

.oOo.

"Harry, can I have a word?" asked Amelia Bones

Harry and Daphne had returned to the veranda for breakfast to find Bones the younger red faced and ready to spit nails.

"That utter bastard!" Susan shouted

"Yes, now let's all calm down and have a bit of a talk." Amelia was adopting her most neutral of tones for a discussion that she knew

could be a powder keg.

Once the Potters had refilled their tea and taken their seats, Amelia began Government Training for Inexperienced Peers and their Spouses. "Harry, I am going to be extremely blunt and extremely brutal. Susan and I heard everything that was said down at the gates and due to my extensive government service; I have learned quite a few things. Are you willing to take my advice?"

Harry paused, glancing at Daphne he said, "Yes Amelia, I'll take your advice."

Amelia nodded and said, "Good. First off, I agree with you completely that in a perfect world, Albus would hang by the neck until dead tomorrow for what he has done to you. Unfortunately, we live in a far from perfect world."

The three teens all nodded and sighed at that truism. "Now, I believe that killing Voldemort is very high on your list of priorities?"

Harry smiled and Daphne laughed out loud, "Yes, that would be a true statement," he answered.

All humor left her face when she followed up with, "Then you must not pursue vendetta, blood feud or any other retribution against that criminally negligent Headmaster of yours."

Harry sat back in his chair and stared at Amelia while Daphne glared at her for a moment, then nodded in concurrence, exhaling loudly in frustration. Harry looked at her for an explanation.

"I haven't been a very good Slytherin today. I've been the wife of a Gryffindor." She smiled and shook her head ruefully. "Look, any pursuit of justice with Dumbledore will only splinter the supporters of the light. Multiple factions will arise; supporters of Potter, supporters of Dumbledore, supporters of the Ministry and so on."



Amelia nodded grimly. "The infighting between the different factions could lead to a victory for Voldemort merely because his opponents are weak and disordered. He could deal with us piecemeal rather easily. I strongly recommend that you forgo your public humiliation of Albus in order to avoid that splintering. Voldemort is a much more deadly threat than that manipulative old bastard."

"Let him get away with it?" Harry almost snarled.

Amelia stared at Harry for a heartbeat, reminding him that she was not his enemy. "No. Have him write out and sign a confession that you can deliver to the Ministry when you see fit."

"About five minutes after Voldemort's carcass starts to cool," said Daphne with a smile.

Amelia nodded and said in an apologetic tone, "I hate to say it Harry, but your need for justice is outweighed by the need to kill that snake faced bastard."

"My need for justice always seems to be running second lately."

Amelia snorted, "Well boo-hoo. Grow up Lord Potter. You want to be treated like an adult and play in the adult sandbox, then act like an adult."

This shocked everyone and she continued, "Do you want to grow old with her?" and Amelia indicated to Daphne.

"Yes"

"Do you want to have children with her and then enjoy grandchildren?"

"Yes"

"Then build a bridge and get over yourself young man."

Harry was silent for a bit before slowly standing and taking his tea with him to the rail of the veranda. The Bones and Daphne sat in quiet contemplation concerning the revelations and decisions of the day. Harry stood there for quite some time, staring out over the fields to the ocean beyond. Finally, he turned back to his wife and friends and said, "You're right. It's about time I grew up."

Amelia nodded and said in a kindly voice, "The hardest part about growing up to be a real adult is learning about humility. It's not something that all Witches and Wizards over the age of majority learn."

Harry nodded at her words, wrestling with their application in his life.

Amelia gathered up her things and before she left for work, said, "By the way, it was certainly evident to me that Albus is terrified of your status as two of the Fifteen. Did you notice it was the only topic he refused to discuss?"

This thought left the Potters and Susan in contemplation.

.oOo.

That day, Harry was especially vicious in their training. It was Neville's first day and he asked Daphne, "Is Harry always this intense?"

"Only when Dumbledore stops by before breakfast," she responded.

They'd covered the Bone Breaking curse today and Harry had been able to cast wordlessly the spell the first time he attempted it. Flitwick had conjured training dummies in the Room of Pain and Harry had split one of them in half with one cast of the curse.

"Well done Mr. Potter. Now while everyone else works on this, I'd like you to work on the Bone Exploding curse. It works very well on large animals or as a killing stroke. The wand movement is thus...now, one hundred times before casting the curse." It still amazed Harry and Daphne that jolly little Flitwick had such a ruthless streak in him.

In Transfiguration, McGonagall drilled them mercilessly on rapid Transfiguration and basic conjuring. They were each given a large piece of wood to transfigure first into a brick wall, the brick wall into a venomous tentacula and the plant into a cat. The cat was to be transfigured back to the original piece of wood. This 'cycle' as she called it, was a basic training loop for practicing the basics of the Universal laws, as well as, to work on spell casting speed.

Neville struggled at first and McGonagall pulled him off to the side. Daphne scooted over and heard the exchange.

"Mr. Longbottom, I have an idea why you struggle so much with Transfiguration. You did very well in Charms and Defense this past year. I sympathize with your struggles in Potions, there are more people in your position than you realize. You are a powerful wizard and can do quite well when you put your mind to it. Your largest problem in this area is concentration and by extension, your attention to the task at hand."

She patted the young man on the shoulder and said in a kindly voice, "I want you to try something. Orient yourself to your target, close your eyes long enough to perform the spell in your imagination, and then perform it without opening your eyes. This has helped many people who have attention problems similar to what you have. Eventually you won't need to do this, but for now, let's go down this path."

Neville nodded, lined up on his block of wood, closed his eyes for a long moment, then when his wand moved and the wood became the brick wall. Slightly opening his eyes, he smiled when he saw the brick

wall and then quickly shut them again. The brick wall became the plant, which became the cat and then back to the wood. It took him three minutes.

Looking at the block of wood, Neville had an ear-to-ear smile and looked up to see McGonagall smiling as well. "Well done, Mr. Longbottom. Now do it again – faster."

Neville nodded, closed his eyes and got to work.

.oOo.

Defense extended their strategic and tactical discussion of dark wizards and their activities. Neville was inexperienced in this arena and didn't bring much to the discussion.

"Tomorrow, we'll begin counter-curses. Filius and Minerva are hitting you hard with the offensive aspects of their areas of expertise, but you will see that if you can counter the spell before it gets within shield range, it effectively turns the spell around on its caster. Nifty little trick if you can do it."

Remus was in full lecture mode and nodded to Susan who had instinctively raised her hand to ask a question. "How do we know what our opponent will be casting?"

He pointed at her and said, "Good question. Most spells have what are called 'tells'. The wand movements, speaking the incantation aloud and sometimes even a foot movement. If your enemy starts fancy footwork, watch out. Those are the darkest of spells that have no counter. The caster is using his or her whole body to cast the spell. The Entrail Expelling curse is one of these; the caster looks like they are going to 'throw' the spell at you like a shot put. Very nasty, not a nice way to die.

Therefore, there are three ways to deal with a curse from an enemy;

dodge it, shield it or counter it. The only reliable course is to dodge it. Even conjured shields can be ineffective against some curses as they pass right through. Like the...?"

"Imperius" said Daphne.

Nodding his head Remus let them go for the day.

.oOo.

"Let's go out tonight," Daphne said. The four teens were lounging in the informal drawing room, what Daphne had dubbed 'the Room of Relaxation' in comic counterpoint to the Room of Pain.

"Sure" said Harry. He was sitting at the end of a couch while his wife was semi-draped over him. Neville and Susan were chatting at a window, Neville exclaiming about something and using his hands in illustration. "Dinner and a movie," he said.

"Dinner and a what?"

"Purebloods" he said as a humorous epithet. Raising his head, he said in an undertone, "Want to invite the budding couple over there?"

After considering, she said, "Sure, let's leave a little early and stop by the twins place first."

At four, while Harry and Neville were waiting at the Entry Hall fireplace, Daphne was putting the last touches on her makeup and hair. She didn't wear much, just a touch here and there, her skin tone and brilliant eyes made most makeup unnecessary.

There was a knock at the door of her dressing room and she called out, "Come in."

Susan entered wearing a close fitting blouse and a long flowing skirt;

she had an uncertain expression and asked, "Do I look Ok?"

Daphne raised her eyebrows at the buxom teen and said, "Sue, with your figure in that outfit, I doubt poor Neville will be able to string together three words tonight."

With a small smile, Lady Bones said, "Good."

Daphne turned back to the mirror, a quick touch here, a brush of her hair once more (Harry liked it loose) and she turned back to the strawberry blond saying, "So, are you going to kiss him tonight?"

"I sure hope so," Susan muttered in an undertone. When Daphne laughed, Susan said, "He's such a good guy, but can be really shy. What about you and Harry? When did he kiss you?"

"Well, we had the whirlwind romance." Susan nodded as they headed to the door, "We kind of kissed each other." Daphne got a far away look in her eyes and said, "We had been talking about some very serious things and I'd found him attractive since at least third year so that was never an issue. There he was, right there and it felt so right. He later told me he felt the same way."

She looked at Susan and said, "If Neville is going to be shy about it, there's no rule that says you can't kiss him."

They found Harry and Neville waiting for them at the Entry Hall fireplace. Harry gave an over the top bow and kissed her hand fervently saying, "I am blinded by your radiant beauty, your loveliness, your..."

"Oh, shut it you," she said while laughing.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Neville just staring at Susan. Harry gave him a surreptitious poke, bringing him around. Finally, Neville said in a low, fervent voice, "You look beautiful."

Susan blushed and smiled, "Thanks."

"Ok, let's go. Leaky Cauldron," Harry called out and stepped into the fireplace, wand in hand.

Neville followed and then Daphne and Susan emerged from the sooty public fireplace in the Wizarding pub. Since it was too early for dinner, there were only four customers in a corner having an unintelligible argument. Harry led the way into the back of the pub and after the requisite taps, they stepped into the hazy sunlight of a late summer afternoon in London.

The brightly colored magical shopping district always made Harry smile. The few street vendors that were peddling their odd wares made for more flavor, complementing the Magical Menagerie ("See Our Line of Pure Stock Kneazles!"), the Magical Luggage Emporium ("All Your Storage Needs Filled Here!") and finally they all ended up in front of 93 Diagon Alley, Weasley's Wizard Wheezes.

The storefront was painted the most lurid neon poison green that any of them had ever seen. It was almost painful to look at. Daphne was reading the hilarious signs in the window and heard Neville say in an undertone "U-No-Poo" and begin to chortle.

Just as Harry mounted the three short steps leading up to the door, the storefront shifted from the ultra bright green to an extra loud orange. Harry actually flinched back from the store at that point. "It's like looking at the sun," Daphne muttered.

Finally, the four made it inside the store to see a brisk trade being conducted. Four people were checking out while approximately another dozen perused the Twins' wares. The Potters, Susan and Neville stood in awe at the huge diversity of products; Weasley Whiz Bangs, Ton Tongue Toffees, Skiving Snackboxes and the other items the twins had used in school. There were ready-made potions that

caused hair color to change, skin color to change even a small vial that promised twenty-four hours of extreme flatulence.

From behind them a familiar voice said, "Oi! We have important customers here!" Turning they saw Fred who was wearing a long sleeve T-shirt that seemed to be shifting color in time with the storefront and on it in large block letters was "FRED – THE GOOD TWIN".

Daphne smiled at him and said, "Good at what?"

Fred gave her a mock leer and said in a husky voice, "Oh, my Lady, come in the back and I'll show you" before he burst out laughing.

They all laughed before Fred gave them the guided tour. "Potions and what-not over here. Product – what we've made up on our own – over there. We've got some other things, in the back see" and he raised his eyebrows.

Harry caught on and said, "Susan, Neville, we'll be right back" as Fred, Daphne and Harry went toward the back room.

Just as Fred lifted the hinged counter for them to pass through, an explosion rocked the Alley.

Harry threw himself on top of his wife as shrieks and screams sounded from inside and outside the shop. Shifting off her and looking up, Harry and Daphne saw three Death Eaters in front of the shop, as they were spreading out in a line. "Oh, shit" said Daphne and grabbed Harry's arm saying, "Come on, we've got to stop them! They're going to take down the building!"

The Potters ran to the front of the shop and crouched behind a display case. Harry said, "I'll take the one in the center, you take the one on the right."



"Prisoners?" she asked.

Harry paused, took a deep breath and shook his head. "Not today."

Daphne nodded and then kissed her husband, "I love you."

He smiled at her and raised his wand, "On three; one, two, three."

They both stood and cast nearly simultaneously. Harry's Bone Breaker left first and shattered the store window shortly followed by the ribcage of the Death Eater ten feet away. Daphne's Cutting curse decapitated Death Eater number two.

Contestant number three, also known as Marcus Flint Jr., stared in dumb shock as his two more experienced companions were cut down like cattle at a slaughterhouse. His contemplation lasted approximately three seconds before another Bone Breaker from Harry snapped young Mr. Flint's pelvis like a taco chip, leaving the former Slytherin writhing on the ground in agony.

Harry and Daphne went to the door, the Twins, Susan and Neville right behind them. Verity, the shop clerk, was herding all the customers to the back of the building to exit the Alley via the Twins' personal Floo connection.

Looking up and down the street, they saw small knots of Death Eaters converging on various shops in the same manner they had converged on the Twins' shop. "Looks like You-Know-Who is making a statement to shop owners who stand up to him," said George.

Ollivander's was the closest besieged shop and Harry turned to his companions with a bit of a mad gleam in his eye.

"Here's what we'll do; Fred, George, you two wait here until all your customers are out and then catch us up. Neville, you and Susan will be a few steps behind Daphne and me. We'll go in, casting first.

Anyone in a black cloak and wearing a mask goes down hard. After our first volley or two, we'll break right, down the same side of the Alley as Ollivander's. I want you two to wait a second or two and after we break right, start casting and break left. The alley isn't really wide enough for a crossfire, but it'll have to do. As soon as we take down those assholes, we'll get back together in front of Ollivander's. Ok?"

Neville had a serious expression when he asked, "Casting to kill?"

Harry nodded, this time with no hesitation. "Yes."

The other four nodded as well, they trusted Harry. Harry scuttled out of the shop, Daphne right on his heels while the other two followed at a distance. She could see five Death Eaters outside the wandmaker's shop. One of them was using the Loudspeaker charm and using various threats to try to intimidate old Ollivander out of his premises. They were going out of their way to keep from damaging the store. Apparently, the stock was worth more than the man was.

All the Death Eaters were focusing on the shop and didn't see the dark haired Potters running up behind them. When they were ten yards away Daphne raised her wand and vocalized the most lethal spell she knew "Lemniscus Diffindo!" and a long pink ribbon of magic shot out of her wand, traveling waist high toward a group of three Death Eaters.

Feeling suddenly light headed, she stumbled and barely registered the three Death Eaters being cut in half by her Ribbon Cutting charm. Harry caught her with his left arm, went for volume over finesse and began a rapid fire casting of Reductor curses, Bone Breaking curses with a leavening of Cutting curses.

Harry wasn't making many hits; he was too busy supporting Daphne. He was casting suppressing fire, hoping to get his woozy wife out of the fight before she got hurt.

The remaining two Death Eaters were shielding his rapid spellcasting when suddenly a jaguar appeared out of the rubble behind them and pounced on the larger of the two servants of Voldemort. The man screamed as the beast dubbed 'Pouncing Death' by the Mayans tore into his chest and locked its jaws on his neck. This violently bloody clue cued his partner to recognize that retreat was preferable to death so he activated his Portkey.

Harry dragged the stumbling Daphne into the shelter of the Apothecary shop as Neville and Susan came running up, the Twins ten feet behind them.

"Is she Ok?" asked Susan, her face full of concern.

"Yeah, she cast a massive Ribbon Cutter back there, took out three at one shot. She's a bit wiped out from it though. Nice Transfiguration."

"I'm fine, love. Just a bit tired," she mumbled and lay her head on his chest.

Susan shrugged at the Transfiguration compliment and checked over her friend for any wounds.

George came up (his shirt said, "GEORGE – THE BETTER TWIN"), and he said, "The Aurors are here and are wiping up what's left."

Harry nodded and looked at his classmates saying, "Lord Longbottom, Lady Bones, may I impose on you to bring an Auror here so as to take our statements. Lady Potter won't be going anywhere but home."

Neville had a small smile at the hint Harry was giving them and said, "Of course, my Lord." Turning to Susan, he extended his arm and said, "My Lady?"

Susan rolled her eyes and said, "Come on Neville" and dragged him off in search of a red robed Auror.

.oOo.

13 July 1996

Daphne came downstairs the next morning to find a small party on the veranda. Harry had sent a letter to the professors begging off today's lessons due to Daphne's need to recover from her exertions in Diagon Alley.

Sitting at the table she found her husband, Susan and Amelia Bones as expected. She also saw Neville in a quiet discussion with Hermione Granger and the Weasley twins.

The Twins saw her come down and fixed her with bright smiles while she gave them her best beady eye. "Who let you two ragamuffins in my house?"

With exaggerated surprise and offense Fred said, "Ragamuffins? You wound me, dear Daphne."

"Indeed. Shocked, saddened, torn to my very roots I am" whimpered George while Fred patted him on the back and made obsequious noises.

Daphne started laughing at them and moved to the sideboard for some food when she felt arms encircle her waist from behind. Feeling mischievous she said, "Good morning, Neville."

Harry snorted and leaned forward. "How are you feeling?" he said before lightly kissing her neck.

"Much better now," she groaned and exposed her neck a little more.

"Good," he said and gave her a small hug from behind.

She finished plating her breakfast as he reached over her shoulder to grab one of Dobby's fantastic blueberry muffins and they returned to the table together.

Sitting between Harry and Hermione, Daphne caught the tail end of Hermione's conversation with Neville regarding the role of the Fifteen in Wizarding history. She turned to Daphne and with real solicitude said, "How are you feeling? Harry told me yesterday about what you did. That's a really powerful spell."

Daphne half shrugged as Harry and the Twins started trading barbs next to her. "I feel a lot better now. Harry got me some Pepper Up yesterday to get through the questioning and statement for the Aurors at the Alley. It had worn off by the time we got home and he had to carry me to bed.

Hermione smirked and said, "Oh, how terrible for your husband to carry you to bed" to which Daphne smiled as she buttered a scone. After she took a sip of her tea, Hermione said, "Harry came and brought me over last night, said he wanted to show me your home here. It's beautiful."

"Yes, it is isn't it? How long can you stay? I'd like to get to know you a bit better outside of Hogwarts."

Hermione sighed, "I'd like to stay, but I really haven't had a lot of time with my parents. After the other day, I still feel somewhat guilty that they feel left behind by my being a witch and all. I want to be home tonight for dinner. I hope you understand?"

Daphne nodded and swallowed some bacon. "I understand completely. You know our Floo address, come over whenever you want. Don't stand on ceremony." An impish smile graced her face and she said, "Harry doesn't know it yet, but my mother and hopefully

my brother and sister are coming this weekend."

"Huh?" said Harry. "My ears are burning, what's going on?"

The conversation was comfortable and easy for the next ten minutes or so until Amelia rose and beckoned to Harry and Daphne. They sat down in the library and Amelia cast a quick privacy ward causing both Potters to raise their eyebrows. After a moment, Amelia asked, "You saw the paper this morning?"

Harry shook his head and Daphne said, "Let me guess either we're heroes or the newest Dark Lord and Lady."

"Heroes. For today at least. What I wanted to talk to you about is...a bit unorthodox. I am doing this with your best intentions at heart." She reached in the pocket of her robe, pulled out two leather wallets, and handed them to Harry and Daphne.

Daphne opened hers and saw an Auror shield and her name on it. Frowning, she looked at Harry's and saw a corresponding shield for himself. They both looked at Amelia, waiting for an explanation.

"You either need to completely stay out of the fight, or become reserve Aurors," Amelia said with a grim expression. "Technically, I should have you both in the dock for first degree murder, you know that don't you?"

This rocked them both back on their heels a bit. After a short contemplation, Daphne said, "What does all this mean?" and she hefted the wallet.

"Since I'm the Director of the MLE, it is a hunting license and makes it all legal. However, you will have to follow the law. It means no vigilantism. None. In a situation like yesterday with clear combatants; good hunting and get as many as you can. On the other hand, you do not go off the reservation looking for the bastards without my express

permission, are we clear?"

Harry and Daphne nodded in acknowledgement. "It also lets me discipline you instead of trying you for crimes. For now, it's a 'get out of jail free' card. Nonetheless, I warn you that you will get a Auror First class arse chewing from me or Alastor Moody if you get too far out of line."

Harry thought for a second, "What about Susan and Neville?"

"I had this talk with them last night at Green Hills. They accepted the badges."

Harry nodded while Daphne contemplated the pros and cons. "Can we be involuntarily brought to active Auror status with these?"

Amelia looked a little uncomfortable with the question but answered truthfully. "Yes. However, with your status as Lord and Lady Potter, it's highly unlikely that would ever happen."

"But it could."

"Technically, yes."

The young couple sat in silence for a long moment before Harry turned to Daphne and said, "What do you think?"

She drummed her nails pensively on the arm of the loveseat they sat on and said, "Well, it boils down to how important it is to you to be involved with your wand and not just your vote. Where you go, I go."

Harry nodded and then extended his hand to Amelia, "Thanks, Amelia. We accept."

.oOo.

The day alternated between stressful and extremely relaxing. Amelia left shortly after her conversation with Daphne and the friends chatted for a while. The ladies adjourned to the library to peruse the titles (all were relentlessly intelligent) while Harry took Neville and the Twins to the beach.

Neville later filled Susan, Daphne and Hermione in on the happenings at the beach. Fred had rolled up the legs of his trousers and was walking through the surf, while George was explaining to Neville and Harry the taxation of their shop.

"You see, we pay rent to the owner of the building; one hundred galleons a month. Pretty steep, but given the location, it's actually a pretty good price. There is a four percent tax on all our goods sold. Fortunately, we don't get hit with the muggleborn tax."

"The what?" Harry asked.

George nodded grimly, "You heard me. Any muggleborn owned business has to pay a flat tax of seventy five galleons a month to the Ministry."

In a small voice, Neville said, "Please, tell me you're joking."

George slowly shook his head and said, "Sorry, mate"

Harry and Neville stood there in silence contemplating this news when they noticed George looking over their shoulders. Turning, they saw Pigwidgeon fluttering at them like a meth-addicted butterfly.

The spastic owl flew to Harry who snatched it out of the air with one grab and a sigh. Looking at the Fred, who'd just rejoined them, he said, "If he's an ass in this, I want you to prank him until he doesn't know his own name."

Harry removed the letter and tossed the odd owl in the air to fly home.



As he read the letter, Harry's face went from neutral to frowning to an out and out scowl.

"What's it say, mate?"

"Your brother has decided to give me another chance to be his friend. He realizes that I must be under some kind of pressure and my marriage is just a big mistake that I made because of that."

The other three winced at that comment. Now, Harry was almost shouting.

"Then, he has the grace to inform me that he smoothed things over with his mother and she too has decided to give me a second chance, only so long as I do not bring 'her' to the house again. I don't need to thank him; it's what best mates do. Oh, and Chudley rules."

Harry looked at the Twins and said, "Was he dropped as a small child?"

Fred nodded solemnly, "Repeatedly. On Percy's head."

This caused a little laughter until Harry said, "I don't get it, he's always been a bit thick and rude to people who don't agree with him, but this?" and he held up the letter.

George looked at Fred and then back to Harry, "Ronniekins has always been jealous of you Harry, you know that. Money, fame and all that stuff you had pushed on you. Your wealth and fame are becoming more..."

"Noticeable. He can't ignore it anymore," finished Fred.

"Yeah, that's it," said George.

After a moment, Neville said, "Well, if you do return to school, you

won't have to room with him."

Harry nodded and looked at the sand for a moment. Suddenly, he looked up and had a big smile. "Want to have some fun? Wait, stupid question. Let me rephrase, let's have some fun."

When the other three looked at him with quizzical expressions, Harry said, "Let's go give this letter to Daphne and Hermione and watch their faces." The other three laughed uproariously.

.oOo.

The ladies were not amused. At all.

"That arrogant berk!" exclaimed Hermione.

After reading the letter, Hermione had launched into a tirade. After Daphne had read the letter, she coolly handed it to Hermione and headed for the Room of Pain. She called over her shoulder, "I'm going to be casting high powered curses, best not come in the room until I come out."

Susan shook her head while the Twins conversed in low tones. Finally, George said, "Harry, want us to begin 'Operation Ronniekins'?"

Harry laughed and said, "Have fun guys." The Twins nodded and headed to the entry hall to use the Floo. The shop needed to be opened so all the lovely goodness contained therein could be spread to the masses. At least, that's what Fred said.

Twenty minutes later, Daphne returned, a slight sheen of sweat on her brow. She called for Dobby and he returned a moment later with a tall glass of lemonade and a smile for "Dobby's Mistress."

After quaffing half the drink, she sat back on the couch and said, "I

feel better now." Looking across the room to where Susan and Neville were talking, she said, "When's the next Wizengamot session?"

"Next Tuesday" responded Neville.

Daphne nodded, "Since you three will be taking your seats, should we try and invite the remaining heads of the Fifteen over for dinner next evening? Formal dinner party and all?"

Susan nodded to herself, thinking about it, while Neville said, "Sounds like a good idea. Socialize with them and all. Gran has always been at me to 'mix and mingle' she calls it."

Daphne went to the small writing table and quickly dashed off a note. Handing it to Neville she said, "Could you give this to your Gran? I'd like to have her help to plan the dinner."

Checking the clock, she motioned to Harry who followed her out of the room. "Occlumency time," she said. They'd decided to perform their meditation at the same time each day to help generate the habit, a good habit though, of meditation.

They had started to meditate in the Atrium, on the southwest corner of the house. They both found it incredibly peaceful and the scents of the plants and flowers combined with the few birds that had found their way in made it a small slice of heaven for them.

Settling into their chairs, Dobby popped in and silently set a jug of ice water and two glasses on the table next to them before popping out again. Daphne gave Harry a nod and he cast "Expiscor Magicus Vorto," and the curtain of darkness descended once again.

Immediately the repetitive noise was in her ears, filing them up to overflowing. The sound had come 'closer' the last few days as they had continued the meditation. It sounded somewhat like her

heartbeat, but it wasn't. Where a heartbeat has a thick, wet sound to it, this noise was grander, larger and, if it's possible to say, beyond a mere heartbeat. At the same time, the rhythm of the noise reminded her of her heartbeat.

Reaching into herself, she tried to will her sight to see the noise, all the while maintaining her awareness of hearing the noise. The noise built into a crescendo of sound and light, filling her up. Her metaphysical ears seemed to expand to be able to process the sudden upswing of sound while her interior sight was auto-focusing like a camera on a military test range. There was a bright flash and then nothing.

"Daph, are you Ok?" asked a worried Harry.

He was leaning over her and had apparently laid her out on the nearby chaise lounge. Her eyes fluttered open, and the brilliant blue orbs slowly focused on her beloved.

Without warning, she was overwhelmed with her feelings for Harry. How much she loved him, respected him and even liked him. It was so unusual to actually like a guy and have romantic feelings, but she really did like him. They played like children sometimes, him chasing her across the grounds in their scant free time or playing childhood games together. He showed her how to play hopscotch, and she showed him how to play wands and cauldrons. They had connected on a basic, fundamental level.

Other times he showed her his passionate side, like the time when they had taken a nighttime walk and he swept her up and made love to her on the shingle of their beach. She had never felt so wanted, attractive and powerful.

"I love you," was all she could manage.

His face perceptibly relaxed. With his knee-watering smile, he said, "I

love you, too. Are you Ok?"

She nodded and pulled him down to her in a passionate kiss that moved into a mini-snog. Breaking the kiss, she pulled him onto the lounge with her and held him to her for a long minute before explaining what had happened in her meditation.

"I have no idea if that was normal or not," she concluded.

"Are you hurt?"

"No. Tired a little, like after the Ribbon Cutter in the Alley."

"What do you say I try it then and if I have the same or similar reaction, we'll know if it's normal or not."

She rolled over on her side, facing Harry. With their faces so close, her eyes almost crossed. She said, "That has got to be the stupidest thing I've ever heard out of your Gryffindor mouth." Daphne was smiling and now broke out into laughter, poking Harry in the ribs.

"Let's do the smart thing and just Floo Mr. Davis, shall we."

.oOo.

It was normal. Sort of. After Daphne had explained the occurrence over the Floo connection, the old man had smiled widely and said, "Very good, you are proceeding much faster than I had anticipated. It's not a normal occurrence, per se. However, it's not unexpected, either. We'll talk more next week and do not be concerned if it happens again. Keep pushing."

Daphne rolled her eyes to Harry who shook his head at the non-informative response. During Harry's experience meditating, he had a similar experience, while trying to both will his interior sight while maintaining his hearing. "It was like an overload," he described

after Daphne had roused him.

Harry sat there, sipping his tea that an anxious Dobby had provided and Daphne watched him. He was so very intent on doing not only well, but also better than Harry even expected he could. She suspected he wanted to protect her, even knowing that she was close to his own magical strength. With a small sigh, she sat next to him and sipped her own tea.

"Hmm, good" she commented.

A/N

1. I own nothing

2. Thanks to everyone who reviewed. A common review mentions that four is not half of fifteen. To the best of my knowledge, this is true \*grins\*. However, in the Authors Notes at the end of chapter 2, I posted the following:

"The Fifteen families are: [Active] Potter, Black, Bones, Longbottom, Boot, MacMillan, Jones, Abbott. [Family line extinct] Stuart, Desimone, Bartram, Shute, Carniol, Watkins, Waterman."

Therefore, there are eight actively titled families from the original Fifteen and therefore 4 is half of Fifteen! Aha! Only half of the Fifteen families need to vote in accord with a bill for override passage in the Wizengamot.

Of note, titles in the English/British peerage, upon which my research has centered, regularly die out. I'm not sure on the requirements for how close is close enough for the title to pass to a cousin (3rd cousin vs. 1st and so on). Check out the Wikipedia website and do a search for "List of Earldoms" or "List of Dukedoms" etc. Pretty thorough listing with the extinctions listed and the re-issuance of Letters Patents and so on. Check the Earldoms and Baronies as they are

original to England. The titles of Marquess/Marchioness, Count/Countess (Continental version of Earl) and Viscount/Viscountess were Norman imports in 1066.

An interesting little tidbit is that the wife of an Earl has no noble title. Within the last millennia, she has been styled a Countess, but is not a peer in her own right.

3. Expiscor Magicus Vorto: (latin) roughly translates as 'find magical core'. I hope that you've figured out that the meditations are going to be very important down the line.

## Chapter 6

14 July 1996, Friday

Daphne awoke to the 5:30 alarm and knew something was wrong. Harry was laying next to her, groaning and weakly thrashing in his sleep. Alarmed, she sat up and shook him by the shoulder saying, "Love, wake up. It's just a dream, wake up."

His eyelids fluttered and he mumbled, "Daph?"

Fully awake now, she said, "Harry?" He had a feverish look about him; rosy cheeks, glassy eyes and sheen of sweat on his face. He promptly closed his eyes and didn't respond to any more of her attempts to wake him. Terrified, she screamed "DOBBY!"

.oOo.

George Stebbins leaned over Harry and ran diagnostics on him while Daphne watched. She had almost lost her self-control when Harry's head had lolled away from her as he passed out. Dobby had appeared instantly and was gone a heartbeat later as she shouted, "Get Healer Stebbins here now!"

After ten minutes or so, George turned to her and motioned to the anteroom off the bedchamber of the Master Suite. Nervously tapping her nails against her chin, she nodded and turned to follow. George closed the door most of the way and turned to Daphne saying, "He'll be fine."

With a great expulsion of breath, she felt as if the entire world was lifted off her shoulders. Not a crying young woman, Daphne felt a few tears create trails down her cheeks in relief. After a few fortifying breaths she said, "What's going on? Is it the backlash from the ward?"



George nodded, "It's hitting him pretty hard. From what I can tell, there was a precipitous drop in his magical reserves overnight, followed by a massive expansion of his magical core. We'll see what happens as he regains his reserves. There's nothing I can do or give him to accelerate his rejuvenation. Time is what he needs now." George put his hand on her shoulder in a friendly gesture and shrugged, wishing he could do more.

Daphne nodded, fairly shaken, she said, "Would you please sit with him for a few minutes? I'd like to Floo Mother to have her come visit while he's ill."

George nodded, "Of course," and re-entered the bedchamber.

After a quick Floo conversation where Evelyn promised to be at Rowan Hill by lunch, Susan and Daphne went to the Master Suite to check on Harry. With only raised eyebrows, Daphne asked her question.

"He's improving as I expected. I'll stay until early afternoon in case of relapse, but I really don't expect it."

Daphne nodded and went to her dressing room to dress for the day. She'd been running around in her dressing gown so far and wanted to get slightly more presentable.

Susan sat down and sighed. Even in the other room Daphne heard her and looked back, to see if something were wrong. She heard Susan mutter, "She loves you so much Harry, you'd best treat her right."

Susan ran back to her room to get her book while Daphne alternated staring at her book and staring at her immobile husband. Every so often, she'd get up and walk out on the balcony, seeing yet not seeing the beautiful grounds and the sea. Inevitably, she returned to her chair on his side of the bed to stroke his hand in hers, run her

fingers through his hair or just sit and wait for something from him.

Just after nine o'clock, Dobby popped in the room and after a worried glance at Harry, said, "Mistress, Professor Charms is being in the library waiting for you and the Master."

"Ah, crap," she muttered and stood. "Send for me if anything happens," she said to George in such a commanding tone that he nodded quickly without thinking.

Minutes later, she strode into the library and found the diminutive Professor perusing the stacks.

"Professor, I'm so very sorry. Harry is suffering from a backlash because of the Power Limiting ward and is unconscious right now. I've been too preoccupied to inform you that we would be unable to attend your instruction, I apologize."

Flitwick looked concerned, but waved it off, "Not a problem at all Mrs. Potter, I completely understand." He paused and then said, "Would you mind if I borrow a few of these books?" as he held up three in his hands.

Daphne smiled her first real smile of the day and said, "Of course, enjoy them."

Nodding, Flitwick shrunk them and put them in his pocket. He then said, "If you'd like, I could take a look at Mr. Potter, I have quite a bit of experience with wards."

"Please, that would be most welcome. Thank you Professor."

.oOo.

Evelyn came through the Floo just before lunch, Astoria and Phillip in tow. Dobby escorted them to the main Drawing Room and popped off

to inform Daphne she had visitors.

George had conjured a table in the corner and was half-buried in parchment forms for ordering potions for his practice, proof reading his dictated reports, insurance forms and so on. He looked at Daphne after rubbing his face and said, "Whoever said being a healer was about patients was a liar. It's about patience."

Daphne was chuckling at the wordplay when Dobby arrived. "Mistress, Mrs. Greengrass and Mistress' Astoria and Phillip is being in the main Drawing Room."

"Thank you, Dobby" she said and rose to check on Harry. He was still sleeping so she nodded to George and headed down to see her mother.

A few minutes later her mother was hugging her firstborn and said, "How is he, blue-eyes?"

Daphne shrugged and said, "Uncle George and Professor Flitwick say he's doing Ok and his magical core is recharging on schedule. Apparently, it just takes time." She shuddered and gave a quick sob, "It scared me so much Mum. He was so...out of it this morning. I didn't know what was wrong."

Evelyn rubbed her daughter's back until she regained her composure. Wiping the tears from her face, she said, "Come on, he's in our bedroom."

Daphne gave her family an abbreviated tour and had to hide her smile at their reactions. Clan Greengrass was very well off; the bulk of the family wealth came from her Great-Great Grandfather who had been an exceptional Potion Master. With wise investments and some profitable business deals, the family had built the family's wealth so that her Grandfather had built Greengrass House in Kent. It was a very nice home, well designed and decorated, but it looked like a

Tunisian mud scrapers' hut compared to Rowan Hill.

After taking them through the formal Dining Hall, of which half of Greengrass House could have fit into, Daphne said, "So do you like my new home, Astoria?"

Her younger sister barely acknowledged the question until poked by her mother. "Huh? Oh yes, your home is wonderful. It's like being in a museum that still has a homelike feel. Wonderful."

An extremely bored Phillip piped up, "Daphne, Harry said you have a pitch here. Could you show me? Mother brought my broom." The poor boy didn't even know why the three ladies all scowled at him.

Eventually, they made it up to the Master Suite where Evelyn admonished her younger two children to behave; their brother-in-law was ill. Daphne went in and made a beeline for Harry's side of the bed. Nothing had changed and he was still out like a light.

After a half hour of waiting wherein Daphne either sat next to her husband or paced, Evelyn knitted and Astoria worked on her summer homework. It was Phillip though, that was being tortured. He liked Harry. Harry was pretty brilliant when you got down to it; he had a Firebolt, his own Quidditch Pitch, was an excellent Seeker and a genuinely nice guy. However, this waiting was killing him.

"Dobby" Daphne called.

When the grey-green skinned major domo of Rowan Hill appeared, his Mistress said in an amusedly exasperated tone, "Please show Philip to the Quidditch Pitch."

The heir to Clan Greengrass jumped up in excitement and ran to the door, remembered himself and ran to his oldest sister and kissed her cheek and ran back to the door. Remembering himself again, he ran

back to his mother and said in a desperate voice, "Mother, may I please?"

Evelyn's face adopted the long-suffering look earned by mothers worldwide, cocked an eyebrow and said, "Change into your grubbies first, and then you can go."

For the third time, he ran for the door, Dobby following. Mother and daughters shared an amused look and light laughter floated through the room.

They took lunch in the small sitting room off the Master Suite. Susan came back up, she had been finishing Advanced Magical Combat and had just a bit farther to go. After drifting out mid-afternoon, she came back in the early evening hours with Neville in tow.

George had departed after lunch, reassuring Daphne that Harry was doing quite well. Evelyn offered to walk him out; she wanted to stretch her legs for a bit, which left the sisters alone.

After a few minutes, Astoria said in a half whisper, "Does he make you happy?"

Daphne gave a watery smile and said, "Very much. Not only do I have all these wonderful romantic feelings for him, but he's also my best friend." She smiled at her hands that lay like an open clamshell in her lap. "It doesn't hurt that he's really hot, too," causing her sister to giggle. Looking back at the silent figure in the bed with a wistful gaze, Daphne said, "I'd never have believed anyone if they had said I'd fall in love with Harry so fast, come to like him so much. Want to spend every moment I can with him. Three weeks ago, I'd have called you a liar, and yet now..."

She looked over to Astoria and said in all seriousness, "Find a guy you like, Stori. Find that person, and I bet you can fall in love with him. I'm so lucky, I don't even know who to begin to thank."

Astoria considered the words of her sister. When they were younger, they'd had normal spats ("Mum! Stori stole my cardigan!", "Mum! Daphne won't get out of my room!"). Behind all the pettiness that is sibling rivalry, she loved her sister. Making a conscious choice to be supportive to her sister, she went and sat next to her on the bed. Wrapping an arm around Daphne's waist, she lay her head on Daphne's shoulder saying, "I love you, big sister. Harry will be fine, you'll see."

.oOo.

15 July 1996, Saturday

Harry slept through the day and night, waking up the next morning in time for their workout.

"Hey, how are you?" Daphne asked as she wiped the sleep out of her eyes.

"I'm great! I've never felt this good, come on, let's work out!"

Daphne could barely keep up with him. He rattled out his usual fifty push-ups and after a moment cranked out ten more ("For my wife" he said with a saucy smile). He still strained using the machine weights, so Daphne saw he wasn't some superman, but he did increase the pace of their run significantly. During the entire five miles, he was alternately humming or when he had breath, whistling, a tune that Daphne couldn't place. After cooling off, they headed up to the bathroom to get cleaned up.

Harry jumped in the shower, humming the tune and as soon as the water came on, he sang in his endearing off-key way, "Lord Almighty! Feel my temperature rising. Higher and higher, it's burnin' through to my soul!" between each line he would "Hmm" and each time, Daphne's jaw dropped a little lower, an enormous smile on her face.

Apparently, someone in the Dursley household had been an Elvis Presley fan.

"Girl, girl, girl, girl, you gonna set me on fire. My brain is flamin' I don't know which way to go!" Daphne had to cover her mouth because he executed a fairly passable spin in the shower while singing into the back scrubber. "Your kisses lift me higher, like the sweet sound of a choir, you light my mornin' sky, burnin' love!"

Now Daphne couldn't help herself and ran from the bathroom, giggles rolling into a hearty belly laugh. God, she'd missed him yesterday. From the bathroom, she heard the big ending as he lifted his voice, "I'm just a hunk 'a hunk 'a burnin' love Ahh, I'm just a hunk 'a hunk 'a burnin' love Ahh..." and she dissolved on the bed in laughter.

.oOo.

George Stebbins stopped by during breakfast and did a quick once over and pronounced Harry "Fit as a fiddle." He stayed to breakfast out on the veranda and sat next to Evelyn, chatting. Harry leaned over to Phillip and in a conspirator's voice said, "Hey, it's a nice day. What do you say we do some flying after Daphne and I do some training we need to catch up on?"

"Really?" the boy responded in awe.

"Really, really" Harry said with a big smile.

He and Daphne rose from the table a few minutes later and went in, Harry saying, "We'll be in the Room of Pain, don't come in until we come out. I don't want anyone getting hurt." No one noticed Harry squeeze Daphne's bum as they walked down the hall. It was a while before Seeker practice.

After their 'workout', Harry disappeared into his office for a bit, "I have

to write a quick note to Dumbledore about our new agreement. I'll 'request' a magically binding confession of his illegal activities no later than the 21st."

"Sounds good to me," Daphne replied as she went to find her mother.

Around eleven o'clock the Potters and Greengrasses were all out on the Quidditch pitch. The male members of the family were airborne while the females were on the ground either watching, reading or just exploring the general vicinity of the pitch.

"Ok, now nose over quickly...good, now pull up. Very good!"

Harry was out on the pitch with Phillip working on Seeker moves and enjoying every minute of it. "Now, I want you to race toward that oak over there with me. I'm going to push at you some, so you can get use to the bumping and jostling of a Snitch run, Ok?"

Phillip wiped the sweat off his brow and nodded. This was a bit harder than he had expected, but even from where Daphne and her mother were sitting, they could tell he was having the time of his life.

Evelyn tapped Daphne on her shoulder as the Seeker and his apprentice swept away from the ladies. Astoria was on the other side of the pitch, picking flowers and singing to herself. Evelyn cleared her throat and said, "Your father sent a note saying that he will be over for dinner this evening."

Daphne's face was chiseled from stone and she said, "Oh really?"

Evelyn nodded and after a long silence said, "He is your father."

Watching her husband and brother, Daphne said in an offhand manner, "Harry might kill him."

Evelyn paled and said, "You told him?"



"About the pain curses? And the other abuse? Yes, I told him."

After a long moment, she said, "If I can guarantee your father's good behavior, could you prevail upon Harry to refrain from attacking him?"

With the emptiest voice Evelyn had ever heard Daphne said, "I'll talk to him."

Evelyn nodded and was silent. In a strange role reversal, Daphne was acting in the role of matriarch and Evelyn and Cyrus were in the role of supplicants. Cyrus would most likely rue his bad behavior toward his daughter before the day was out.

After lunch in the family dining room, Daphne steered Harry out to the formal gardens. They ambled up and down the beautiful paths, stopping every so often to enjoy the splendor on display, to hold each other and sometimes to exchange small kisses. After ten minutes or so, Daphne said in a voice pitched so low that Harry had to strain to hear her, "My father wants to come to dinner tonight."

Harry froze, and after a moment, looked quizzically at his wife. "Do you want him here?"

With a deep sigh, she said, "No, but I should..."

He cut her off and said, "Should what? Invite a man who intentionally caused you harm into our home? I should kill him for what he did to you." He let go of her hand and ran both of his through his inky locks. After a long moment, he spat, "Should we invite the Dursley's over next?"

Daphne let out a guttural noise, almost a growl before she regained her composure. He pressed his advantage and said, "It's the same. The Dursley's abused me abominably and your father abused you abominably. Why should I let the bastard through the wards?"

They were silent for a moment, Daphne minutely inspecting a rose in front of her. Eventually, a whisper escaped Daphne, almost as if by accident, "Because my mother asked for it."

Harry slumped and immediately pulled her into his arms. Surprisingly, Daphne gave a small sob and Harry pulled her closer. "I'll do it this time, but I'm going to have a chat with dear old dad first. Alone. If he acts up, I'm giving Dobby orders to protect you at all costs. I've seen him when he's riled, your father doesn't want that."

Daphne could only nod against his chest, trying to absorb as much courage and strength as she could from her husband.

Harry let Daphne be for a bit. She asked for a little alone time and he said, "Sure. If you need me, send for me. I'm going to have a chat with Dobby. I'll be in the library after that, or maybe the Atrium."

Daphne wandered the paths of the garden and eventually up into the hills. She called for Dobby, they slapped together a menu in seven minutes, and then she continued her perambulating. Shaking her head slowly, Daphne couldn't shake the feeling that she felt torn in two. On one hand, she wanted to help Harry tear into her father, paying him back for all the years of pain and abuse. Release the pent up hatred and resentment.

In the back of her mind, a small voice whispered to her a word that is often misunderstood; forgive. She shook her head and her raven tresses swirled and swarmed about her face. Dashing the tears from her eyes, she felt the old rage and maelstrom of hurt and pain rise up within her. She was almost reveling in the pain when one thought cut through all her reliving of past hurts and belittlements, pushing aside her suffering and burnt a single thought in her consciousness: Would that make Harry proud of me?

She literally stopped in her tracks and stared at the boulder off the

side of the path. Her mind had stopped revolving at high speed to an almost dizzying effect and she felt the need to sit. The sudden realization that she seriously doubted that using the Cruciatus curse on her father would make Harry proud of her seemed so obvious, yet in complete contradiction with her anger, rage and resentment. He'd understand and condone it, but he wouldn't be proud.

What about herself? Would she be proud of hurting her father? Is it something she couldn't wait to tell Harry or her friends? Even her children some day?

These considerations drained the thoughts of vengeance out of her as neatly as pulling a plug out of a washtub. Just like the washtub draining, Daphne felt empty. She didn't like her father and if they weren't related by blood, she wouldn't willingly associate with him. At all. So what to do? A relieving thought occurred to her that she didn't have to have the answer right away. Tonight, he'd come to dinner, Harry would let him know that he was on warning and they would figure it out from there.

She felt a slight touch of shame that Harry was going to confront her father about his behavior. On the one hand, she felt that it was her duty and right to confront Cyrus on his abusive, abhorrent behavior. On the other hand, she realized her husband was doing her a favor and allowing her to remove herself from a situation where she would probably do something she would later regret.

Feeling much better, she apparated back to the house to find her husband.

.oOo.

The evening found Daphne in the formal Drawing Room with Susan chatting with her mother, sister and brother; all dressed for dinner. Harry was currently in what he called 'his office' awaiting his father-in-law.

Evelyn was unhappy. She realized that her daughter and son-in-law had every right to accost her husband, but she knew he would push back and possibly make a scene. She'd told Daphne as much only to be politely rebuffed. It was the first time that Daphne had asserted herself over her mother at Rowan Hill and it surprised both of them. Daphne had been surprised because Evelyn bowed to her desires and Evelyn because Daphne had boldly, yet courteously, disagreed and set forth the course of action she was going to follow, regardless of her mother's desires.

Evelyn only hoped it wouldn't turn back on her daughter like a snake.

Daphne rested on the settee dressed in an elegant evening gown. Thoughts were turning over and over behind an impassive mask. She'd warned Phillip and Stori that Harry was going to confront their father and to expect that things might be a little tense over dinner. Susan glanced at her from time to time. Her new friend could tell something was up, but had no data to fill in the blanks.

The fireplace in the Entry Hall roared, shortly followed by the pop of Dobby arriving. Daphne smiled, she remembered the feral expression on Dobby's face after Harry had filled him in on the details of the situation and given him his orders for the evening. A murmur of voices was heard and she could only assume that the Head of Clan Greengrass was about to be taken to the woodshed by the ninth Earl of Potter, seventh Viscount Black, Head of the Ancient and Most Noble Houses of Potter and Black.

.oOo.

That evening as they lay in bed, Harry related to Daphne what had occurred in his office.

Harry sat in his office, pensive for the forthcoming meeting. He was behind his desk, elbows on the arms of his chair and his fingers

tented in front of his mouth. Every so often, he would tap his lips with his fingers as he leaned back in his chair.

Harry's office was a magnificently apportioned room with Persian rugs, original magical and mundane masterpieces and the piece de resistance, a globe the size of a dragon's egg with Gubrathian Fire dancing merrily inside. From the small plaque attached to the stand he knew that in the year 1409 William Potter cast the spell to create this everlasting fire. Harry and Daphne would come in his office late at night watching the flames lick at the glass in wonder as the diminutive inferno cycled through all the colors of the rainbow.

Cyrus came in the room like the proverbial cat that ate the canary. He was all smiles and joviality. Harry was waiting for him to say something along the lines of, "What say to a drop of Whiskey, eh?" The grin and jovial disposition slowly slid off Greengrass like melting ice when Harry did not rise from his chair, nor change his posture. After a long evaluating moment, Harry wordlessly indicated a waiting chair on the opposite side of his massive mahogany desk.

A now frowning Cyrus Greengrass took his seat and regarded his new son-in-law with annoyance. It couldn't have been more evident had his thoughts be written on parchment, Greengrass was broadcasting, "One of the Fifteen or not, he was still a whelp and should treat his elders better."

"Mr. Greengrass, I'd like to discuss with you the terms of you visiting my home," Harry said in a tone like frozen steel.

Greengrass blinked, "Well, Harry, I don't..."

"I don't remember giving you permission to be familiar with me Greengrass."

Greengrass blinked again, paused, blinked a further time before recognizing the situation for what it was. "I see," he said as he settled

back in his chair. "My daughter has been telling stories again."

Now Harry had exert quite a bit of effort to control himself. Interrupting the older man, he said, "Listen to me Greengrass. On Tuesday, I will assume the seats of Black and Potter. My close friends, Lord Longbottom and Lady Bones shall also assume their posts. The first piece of legislation we will ram down the throats of Wizarding Britain is to make it illegal to abuse children by word, magic or hand. You sir, are a monster and if I had my way you'd be swinging in the dock."

"Now see here..." Greengrass blustered.

"No, you see here you bastard," Harry spat as he jabbed his finger at the portly man. Visibly collecting himself, he looked Greengrass in the eye. "Your wife and my wife interceded on your behalf this afternoon. It was my intent to challenge you to a duel and kill you before the night was done." The older man blanched at the bald statement.

"Since I respect your good lady and would go the ends of the earth for mine, you will live past this meeting. However," here he stood and leaned over his desk, "If you ever abuse Astoria, Phillip or heaven help you Evelyn again, I will kill you. No one treats my family in the way that you have been so doing for years. Have I made myself clear Greengrass?"

Greengrass only stared in dumbfounded amazement at the furious Boy-Who-Lived. When Harry cocked his head, looking for a response, Cyrus numbly nodded his acquiescence. Daphne had been right, when confronted with real power, a bully folds.

"Now, the terms for you visiting here. You will be welcome in this home only if you behave in a civilized manner. We have semi-permanent guests in Lady Bones and Director Bones. You will address them as befitting their station and not as familiar as you

were to me earlier. You will obviously treat your children and spouse in a respectful manner. If I find you mistreat our family House Elf, I will have it out of your hide. I don't believe I am asking too much. Act like a civilized human being." Harry rose and walked slowly around his desk toward the door.

Cyrus hesitantly rose, was going to follow when Harry stopped and turned back, eyes blazing, "Lastly. You shall not contact any supporter of Lord Voldemort, nor the Dark Lord himself ever. You shall not practice any Dark Arts, ever. I will have your magical oath. If this is unacceptable, please leave." Harry stood there, waiting for compliance. Shakily, Greengrass withdrew his wand, grasped it in the middle and made his magically binding oath. Harry nodded and said, "Please follow me to the Drawing Room for cocktails before dinner."

.oOo.

Dinner was strange, but in retrospect, it couldn't have been any different. Cyrus and Evelyn Greengrass were nearly silent the entire meal. After a minor faux pas where Cyrus went to the head of the table (Harry's seat as Lord of the Manor), everything went well. Susan was sitting to Harry's right and Astoria to his left. They chatted about school and other such topics. With Astoria a rising fourth year, Susan and Harry recounted their experiences, especially Defense with the imposter Moody. Apparently, in the lower forms, he hadn't been as flamboyant as he had for the class of '98.

At the other end of the table, it was much quieter. Daphne had her parents flanking her with Phillip eating as much food as he could shove down his nine-year-old throat. "Did the Quidditch give you an appetite dear?" asked Evelyn.

Phillip swallowed, wiped his chin and said, "Yes, Mother." As a sad aside, he glanced at his father to see if there was a hostile reaction. In an unusual turnabout, he saw none. With a small smile of thanks

to Harry, he went back to his meal.

.oOo.

16 July 1996, Sunday

Sunday had been an easygoing day. After an awkward breakfast, Cyrus left via the Floo, claiming pressing business. "On a Sunday?" Harry asked Daphne. She just shook her head and headed out to the garden to enjoy the warm sunshine.

Susan went over to Green Hills and didn't return home until nearly midnight, giving Harry and Daphne quite a bit of time to get to know Amelia much better. They chatted on and off through the day and they came to know the woman behind the reputation as the 'hard-as-nails' Director of the MLE.

Her brother, Susan's father, had been her best friend growing up. When Edmund and his wife Sophie were killed by Death Eaters it was obviously a heart shattering experience for her. She would talk fondly of her childhood and Hogwarts years, but after that, she'd only talk about work or Susan.

Harry and Daphne spent some time with Evelyn, but the older woman seemed distracted and almost aloof. The Potters ended up spending most of the time cuddled in bed or meandering about the extensive grounds. All in all, it was a perfect day.

.oOo.

17 July 1996, Monday

Harry's energy level remained high and he pushed himself even harder in his exercises. Done with the joking, he cranked out a hundred push-ups to his and Daphne's surprise.



With his excellent reflexes, Daphne always had a hard time hitting him during the dodging exercises. However, today, she only got three hits. Scratching his head in a worried confusion, he said, "It's nice and all, but a bit scary. It's like some fairy tale book where whoosh, the hero has all these super powers overnight. Rather ridiculous."

Daphne nodded, "True, but maybe there is a correlation between physical ability and magical power?"

Harry nodded thoughtfully at the comment, "Let's ask Flitwick, see what he says."

They met up with Flitwick in the Room of Pain promptly at nine o'clock. Before the Professor could begin, Harry said, "Sir, is there a correlation between physical ability and magical power?"

Setting his bag down, Flitwick nodded. "Most definitely. For a muggle of my stature, there is no way they could move as quickly or fluidly as I do. Jump as high or dodge as fast, either. I am rated as a Sorcerer, borderline Grand Sorcerer based on the Hammerstein Magical Index. That's fairly powerful. Of course, the Headmaster and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named are both Grand Sorcerers and I think He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is actually a Mage, but don't quote me on that.

"Most Wizards and Witches are rated as Magicians or Master Magicians. If you'd like, I can set up an appointment with Madam Pomfrey to get the two of you evaluated?"

Susan and Neville walked into the room at this point and Daphne said, "Thank you sir, that would be illuminating for us, especially given the events of last Friday."

They worked on the Bone Breaking and Shattering curses some more. Since Harry had them both mastered, he lined up on the range, performed his one hundred wand movements and then cast the

Bone Breaker. The usual ephemeral gray colored spell fire lanced out of his wand a bright grey and the ribbon of eldritch fire that constitutes a spell was as big around as Harry's arm.

The room fell silent, and in a comic moment, Harry just held his wand in front of his face, staring dumbfounded at it. "Mr. Potter" Flitwick said in a soft voice, "Could you please cast that spell again?"

Regaining his senses, Harry sighted downrange and stopped again, his mouth agape. The dummy he had lined up on was gone and the wall behind where it had stood was scorched with a small fire smoldering. Sliding over a spot, he cast the spell again with the same results; a vaporized target dummy and a spell-scorched section of wall.

"You three continue with the Bone spells," Flitwick said to Neville, Susan and Daphne. "Mr. Potter, if you would, please?" and indicated the other corner of the room.

Flitwick leaned on the wall and said, "It appears that the cessation of the Power Limiting ward has truly unleashed your power. How do you feel now? Tired? Drained?"

Harry shook his head slowly, "No, Professor, I feel great."

Nodding his head slowly, Flitwick said, "We'll continue on as we have been. Later, I'd like us to move outside to get a good feel for what you can do. High powered Reductors at boulders. That kind of thing."

Harry nodded and then the Charms Master said, "For today, I want you to work on a conjunction of spells, weaving them together. This way, in a fracas, you will seamlessly transition from the first to the second.

"String together the Reductor curse followed by the Piercing hex. You may or may not know, but the Piercing hex is a wonderful spell in that

that it has no wand movements, like the Reductor, and can shatter many Basic Shields. With your power level, you can very quickly get these two spells out, hammer an opponent's shield down and finish them off. After you get these two down, we'll add a third in the spell chain. One of the Bone spells most likely, you seem to have an affinity for those."

Harry returned to the line and saw that Susan and Daphne were having a contest to see who could blow all the limbs off their dummy first. Neville was doing as he had the previous year in the DA; buckling down and getting the spell down as quickly as he could, no frills, no fuss.

They covered the Explosion hex (Confringo), the Fire Whip (no incantation) and the Advanced Shield spell (Contego).

Daphne was struggling with the Fire Whip. With no incantation, the crux of the casting process was to visualize and feel the Whip as an extension of the caster's wand. Next to her, Harry was wielding the whip like a cowboy. "How did you get it?" she asked.

Harry shrugged, "I just pushed a little harder with my magic than I usually do."

Daphne focused, pushed hard with her magic and saw the whip of flame shoot from the tip of her wand. Before cracking a big smile, she felt the tug on her magic. Usually, she could just cast without repercussion (except for high power spells) but she felt this. Realizing that Harry had casually performed an act for which she had to put in extra effort, caused a smile to blossom on her face. Turning back to Harry, she gave him a soft kiss.

"What was that for?"

"I have more hope now than I did before that you'll send that bastard to hell."

In Transfiguration, they started Animating. Ever since Harry had described the duel between Dumbledore and Voldemort, Daphne had wanted to be able to use Animation as a tool in a duel.

They started small. The first task was to Animate a chair to walk. It was much more difficult mentally than it was magically. "You must imagine and then will the chair to walk. That means on four legs." That had been a difficult barrier. When she turned around in frustration at one point, she saw Neville walking on his hands and feet, bum sticking in the air. She almost started to laugh, but then realized he was on to something. After a quick look around, she dropped to all fours and walked around for a bit. Ten minutes later, her chair was trotting around the Room of Pain.

They had the day off from Defense; it was a full moon day, so the foursome cleaned up and apparated to Green Hills for a discussion with Lady Augusta for Wednesday evening's dinner.

After an hour and a half, Daphne had a thick sheaf of notes and Harry had a blinding headache. Neville and Susan had run away after twenty minutes, their roles discussed and the conversation had moved on. Despite their friends' reaction, Daphne was soaking up the instruction and advice from Lady Augusta like a sponge. This was to be her role; the facilitator of the Fifteen is how she saw it. Harry was easily the most powerful of the members, so it was up to her to help provide comfortable social settings for the voters to meet and discuss matters in an informal setting.

She and Harry had already discussed it and he told her in no uncertain terms that he not only wanted, but needed her input on voting issues. They would work as a team. There might be times when he would vote his own conscience in opposition to her, but he needed her nonetheless. Just because she didn't actually cast the 'aye' or 'nay' vote, didn't mean she was to sit on the sidelines. It was her job to help them achieve their goals as best she could. She was

the other half of the brain behind the vote, per se.

Usually, a dinner party like this would require a month's advance notice to assemble the Fifteen. Lady Augusta said with a small smile, "I have a feeling that the other four can clear their appointment calendars for this."

.oOo.

Lady Augusta had helped Daphne with the invitations; for they all had to be hand written and personalized. As soon as they got home, Daphne called for Dobby.

"Dobby, I want you to deliver each of these invitations to the addressee and await a response."

Bowing deeply, the elf said, "Yes, Mistress" with a bit more fervor and devotion than he had ever said, "Harry Potter, sir."

Almost running into her 'office', Daphne sat at the desk and was reviewing the menu for the dinner. She and Lady Augusta had debated back and forth and had settled on the menu for the full seven course meal. Solly, the Longbottoms' House Elf, was going to come over after dinner tomorrow and help Dobby with all the preparations.

She put her face in her hands, the stress beginning to get to her. Rubbing her face, she felt strong hands begin to gently knead her neck and shoulder muscles. "Ohh, you're hired. What's your daily rate? Talk to my husband, he'll take care of it."

Harry chuckled, "Come on. A ten minute walk won't spoil everything and it will help, I think."

She accepted his invitation and they were soon walking down on the beach, watching the sunset. Harry held her from behind and she

leaned back into him.

"Are you ready for tomorrow? Did your robes come?" she asked.

"Yep. Neville, Susan and I have rehearsed the lines and I think I can pull them off. There is nothing on the schedule besides the assumption of our seats, so I don't expect a vote for anything. And yes, the robes did come. I need to try them on to make sure they fit."

They sat there in silence, watching as the darkness filled in the gaps around the stars. A whisper on the sea breeze carried her words to his ear, "I love you."

"I love you too."

.oOo.

18 July 1996

"Hear ye, hear ye! Lords and Ladies, Members and Proxy-Members, please be seated for the fourteenth convocation of the noble Wizengamot in the year One Thousand, Nine Hundred and Ninety-Six. Hear ye, hear ye..."

The rustling of robes and murmurs of the members as they took their seats was like thunder to Lady Potter. Daphne sat in the private viewing box, separate from the public box. Lady Augusta sat next to her and from time to time reached over to pat her hand. Daphne had been a bundle of nerves all day, seemingly much more nervous than Harry.

After their morning workouts, Flitwick had pushed Harry harder than he had before. Now they were working on varying the power applied to each spell.

After conjuring a candle Flitwick had the four students gather round.

With a minute flick of his wand he said, "Incendio" and the wick lit with a small flame. Turning away from them, he conjured a slab of granite, paused and then repeated the wand movement and again incanted, "Incendio."

This time, instead of the negligible fire appearing, a gout of orangish-red flame exploded out of his wand. The granite wall began to glow red as it heated rapidly. Flitwick's face furrowed in concentration, and the flames turned white-hot. Now, the granite wall began to run with rivulets of molten rock. After a long half minute, the Charms Professor canceled the spell and then vanished the puddle of magma. Turning to his students, he merely said, "Questions?"

Harry immediately responded with the question they all were contemplating, "How, sir?"

With a slightly feral smile, Flitwick said, "I'm glad you asked that Mr. Potter..."

Harry cast "Incendio" with everything he had at a new granite wall and it had melted like ice in the noonday sun. Swaying a bit, Daphne caught him. He shook his head, clearing it. Responding to her look of concern, he kissed the tip of her nose and said, "I'm Ok now. No worries."

He had spent the rest of the Charms lesson varying the power in his stunning spells on a conjured cow. He must have cast two hundred spells in the hour and a half. If you thought stunning a Death Eater was hard, try stunning a six hundred pound bovine. "You must be able to control the varying of power you put into your spell, Mr. Potter" Flitwick had lectured. "It wouldn't do for you to render yourself unconscious in the middle of a fracas just because you cast your first spell with too much power, would it?" The other three practiced with the Flame charm, surprisingly, all three could generate the white-hot flames for a short period.

Recalling herself to the present, Daphne watched the Sergeant-at-Arms calling the session to order. Harry, Neville and Susan were outside the chamber, waiting to be summoned by the Chief Warlock. After much rumbling and rustling, the members were all seated and somewhat silent.

Daphne saw a veritable who's who of Wizarding Britain. Fudge sat next to Dumbledore's Chief Warlock Seat and Amelia Bones next to the Minister. Across the hall sat Narcissa Malfoy, probably acting as the Proxy-Member for her incarcerated husband.

Lady Augusta tapped Daphne's arm and indicated to the side of the chamber opposite the Chief Warlock's throne like seat. There were seven seats, similar in design to the Chief Warlock's and in four of them, sat wizards of varying ages in the extremely ornate robes that her husband and friends were currently wearing.

They were beautiful robes, more artistic creation than clothing. They forcibly reminded Daphne of the Bayeux Tapestry with the hand-sewn histories embroidered in gold and copper thread. Each house head's robes were unique in that they told major events of the history of their house. On the chest, over the heart was the crest of the house and their motto as the case may be.

Harry's robes were doubly unique in that he was the head of two of the houses. Checking with the Wizengamot Chief of Protocol, it was decided that the front of his robes was to be Potter and the back of them Black.

"My Lords and Ladies. Members and Proxy Members, I welcome you to this convocation of the Wizengamot of Great Britain and Northern Ireland," Dumbledore intoned from his seat. He was the only person standing and was wearing robes that were richly embroidered, but noticeably less ornate than those of the Fifteen.

"We are here today for an historic occasion. We have two Lords and



a Lady here to claim their rightful seats, but not only their seats, but the seats of the Fifteen ruling houses of Britain that was," here Dumbledore bowed his head as if genuflecting. "I call forth the Earl of Potter, Viscount Black, Harry James Potter!"

The massive doors to the chamber opened and Harry strode into the center of the chamber and regarded the Chief Warlock with an almost curious expression. "My Lord, do you come to claim your hereditary seats?"

Without blinking, Harry lifted his voice so as to carry through the chamber and said, "I do, my Lord. I am The Potter of Potter, The Black of Black and come to claim the seats of Potter and Black, my right by blood and by inheritance. I claim two seats of the Fifteen, the ancient ruling houses of Britain that was," and Harry repeated the genuflecting motion.

There was a tense, pregnant pause as half the assembled watched Narcissa Malfoy, waiting for her to object. Strangely, she had a mask of indifference and the moment passed with Dumbledore calling out the ritual words, "So I see, so let it be," and Harry sketched a barely polite bow before turning to take his seat.

The chamber seemed to exhale as Dumbledore continued, "I call forth the Earl of Longbottom, Neville Franklin Longbottom!" Daphne heard the question and answer for Neville and a small part of her heard Dumbledore's call of "I call forth Viscountess Bones, Susan Amelia Bones!", but she had eyes only for Harry. He stoically sat in his chair, seemingly unconcerned with the events occurring around him, yet she knew that he was nervous.

There had been some shaken heads amongst the gaffers when Susan took her seat. No one could deny, though, her nobility of carriage and her quiet dignity that was evident even to the most misogynistic member in the chamber. For the more obvious miscreants, Susan unleashed what Harry called 'the stare' that felt

like she was using her eyes to drill through a person in her disdain.

The Orphans took their seats and in accordance with some discussions they had previously, they did not talk to each other, but rather surveyed the other members. Giving the appearance they were judging the other members worthiness of even being in the same room with them, much less in the same governing body.

When Daphne saw Harry glaring at Ricardo Lestrangle, father of Rabastan and Rudolphus, she almost started laughing. Harry was settling in and making it known that he was his own man. Fudge merely got a glance. It was pitiful watching the Minister for Magic trying to catch Harry's eye.

After the reading of the role and the closing of the ceremonial session, Harry, Neville and Susan approached Amelia en masse and began a discussion with her. This was Lady Augusta's contribution to the kickoff of their plan to remove Fudge and replace him with Amelia. Everyone present saw half of the votes of the Fifteen chatting in a friendly manner with the head of the DMLE. In a moment of sheer hilarity, Fudge and Dumbledore attempted to join the conversation but were screened by subtle shifts by Neville and Harry. Lady Augusta saw that and said, "Oh my," before she covered her mouth and began chuckling.

After making their point, the Orphans turned back to their fellow members of the Fifteen and made their introductions. Daphne and Lady Augusta now descended from the visitors' box to wait just outside the doors of the chamber.

Daphne descended from the last step and turned the corner. Her eyes widened and then she put a large smile on her face as she was engulfed in a flowing tide of reporters and photographers.

"Lady Potter! Look over here!"

"Are you really pregnant?"

"Is it true you used a love potion on your husband?"

"Have you gone on your honeymoon yet? Where?"

All this and more was shouted at her rapid fire. From the most insulting to the most vapid, it was astounding the inanity being spewed from the fourth estate. Smiling to all, but not saying a word, Daphne forged a path for herself and Augusta to meet up with the Orphans.

She reached the doors to the Wizengamot Chamber as the Orphans were coming out. Now the jackals turned their attention to the House Heads and the festivities continued.

"Lord Potter is it true you were paid one million galleons to marry your wife?"

"Harry are you going to quit school to play Quidditch full time?"

"Lady Bones is it true you had an illicit relationship with Lady Potter?"

"Lord Longbottom..."

DMLE Officers created a cordon, pushing the reporters back and the friends found themselves in a small pocket of relative calm. Just then, Narcissa Malfoy exited the chamber. Harry and Neville sketched short bows and she gave an abbreviated curtsy, murmuring, "My Lords, my Lady." Smirking at Harry, she got close enough not to be overheard by the vultures with parchment and quill at the ready.

"You are probably wondering why I didn't challenge your assumption to the Black seat. Let's just say that if you were to have an...unfortunate...demise. My son would become Lord Black and now that the titles are joined, he could also lay claim to Lord Potter."

Stepping back, she gave a predatory smile. Her incredible beauty, which had only been refined with her age, became hard, brittle and sharp as her face twisted in poisonous malice. "Good day my Lords, my Lady."

The group of friends absconded as best they could while the reporters continued to be held back by the DMLE Officers. Entering the Ministry Atrium, Harry turned to the Longbottoms and said, "Would you care to come to Rowan Hill for tea?"

"That would be wonderful, my Lord. I haven't been there since I visited your grandparents in '76."

.oOo.

The friends were shortly joined by Amelia Bones. As they sat down to dinner, Amelia and Lady Augusta were chuckling about the very intentional, yet discreet snub, 'the boys' as they called them, gave the Minister and Chief Warlock. "Harry," said Lady Augusta, "I do believe that half the members had to turn away when you two rascallions gave the Minister and the Chief Warlock a shove with your hips. I know I did."

Amelia just shook her head, chuckling as she ate her soup. Harry and Neville gave the Grand Dame a concerted look of innocence which sent Daphne and Susan into smothered laughter. Finally, Harry said, "Amelia, will you be able to attend tomorrow's dinner?"

She nodded through her soup, set down her spoon and said with a predatory smile, "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

.oOo.

Later that evening, Harry was affixing a letter to Hedwig's leg as Daphne came out of the bathroom brushing her hair. "What's the

letter?"

"Oh, a little note to the editor of the Prophet."

With raised eyes, she said, "...and?"

"I just wanted to let him know that the Fifteen were to meet here tomorrow and the only non-voter or spouse would be the Director of the MLE."

She smiled and set down her brush. Sauntering up to her husband, she let her robe drop to the floor. Harry's eyes immediately left her face for a long moment before returning with a hungry look. "See something you like?" she asked in a coquettish way.

Nodding, he kissed her with ferocity and pushed her up against the wall. "I love you, I want you."

Smiling, she whispered, "Good."

.oOo.

19 July 1996

During their morning workouts, Harry continued to push himself and Daphne harder than they'd worked before. After their grueling five mile run which they ran at a 7:30/mile pace, they both found themselves bent over and gasping for breath at the end. After a few minutes they walked for a bit, to cool off and eventually ended up in the family dining room for breakfast to escape the drizzling rain.

"Morning all" greeted Harry.

A nod from Amelia and a grunt from Susan were all the response he got in return. Daphne went over to Susan and said, "You really ought to work out with us in the morning. You'll have more energy all day

and I don't think you'll complain about the affect on your figure."

Susan cocked her head to one side and said, "I'll think about it."

"Harry, look here" said Amelia as she handed him the paper indicating a particular article.

Sipping his tea, he started to read. Daphne plated her breakfast from the sideboard and went to read over his shoulder. The article described the Wizengamot ceremony in a fairly straightforward fashion, but at the end it said:

"...at the end of the session, the newest members of the Wizengamot and especially of the Fifteen, made their leanings very obvious by immediately engaging Director of Magical Law Enforcement, Amelia Bones. While it is unknown what was discussed, both Lord Longbottom and Lord Potter prevented Chief Warlock Dumbledore and Minister Fudge from joining the conversation with subtle screening of the others with their body. Most interesting, says this reporter and could be leading to a shift in the political leanings of the Fifteen. For the last fifty years, the Fifteen have been unable to create a majority (half or greater) in order to direct and guide Wizengamot policies. Lords Potter and Longbottom along with Lady Bones are a majority unto themselves. It is rumored that the entire Fifteen is gathering at Rowan Hill, the home of Lord Potter and temporary home of Lady Bones now that Oak Park Hall was destroyed last week by Death Eaters. It is also known that Lords Potter and Longbottom have been friends since their first year at Hogwarts, and are friends with Lady Bones as well.

For a biography of Lord Potter, Harry Potter, see page 4

For a biography of Lady Bones, Susan Bones, see page 6

For a biography of Lord Longbottom, Neville Longbottom, see page 6"

Daphne nodded her head and sat down next to Harry, eating her meal. After finishing her meal, she leaned back and sipped her second cup of tea. Smiling, she said, "The paper did exactly what we wanted."

Harry turned to her and just smiled.

.oOo.

Daphne begged off the magical training for the day, "You go ahead, love. I've just too much to do. I'll see you at lunch" she said to Harry when Flitwick arrived.

The rest of the day was spent in sometimes calm and other times frantic preparation for the dinner party. Solly was a lifesaver and Daphne made a mental note to ask Dobby if he needed help.

The food preparation was well underway, she had gone over the rooms and the place settings and all was as it should be. After bolting her lunch, she double-checked the wards were configured correctly, did some last minute clean up in the gardens and recast the insect repelling charm about the veranda, Formal Drawing Room balcony and the portico outside the front door. When Harry came and found her at three, her raven hair had escaped the loose bun she'd put it in, there were smudges of dirt on her left cheek and she had a small rip in her robes.

He saw her and smiled. Realizing her state, he stopped, blinked back what would be an unfunny remark and said, "You've done a wonderful job, Daph. The house is perfect and I saw Dobby and Solly had everything under control. Let's go sit for a bit, let you catch your wind."

With a little smile, she kissed him and said, "You're a good husband, I think I'll keep you."

.oOo.

Neville came over early at five o'clock. He, Amelia, Susan and Harry chatted about personalities and posturing for the upcoming meeting. By consensus, the Orphans decided not to make any political stances known outside of 'Beat Voldemort.'

Daphne was still running around and checking things when Susan found her and forcibly took her to the Master Suite. "Dobby and Solly have everything in order. Now get ready, your guests will be here in an hour and a half. Move." Susan could have been a drill instructor if she had the inclination.

An hour later, a dressed and primed Daphne Potter made her way downstairs. She sat next to Harry and they tried to chat away their nervousness. At exactly six thirty, there was a pop of apparition from the Entry Hall. A short moment later, a perfectly attired Dobby escorted a smiling couple in their forties into the room. Everyone rose, and Harry approached the man.

"Good to see you so soon again, sir. Daphne, I'd like to introduce to you Viscount and Viscountess Abbott. My Lord, my Lady, my lovely wife, Countess Potter." Daphne inclined her head and shook their hands.

"My Lady, it is truly a pleasure to meet you. Please, call me Reginald, my wife, Victoria."

"Please, call me Daphne. Reginald, Victoria, welcome to Rowan Hill."

The Abbotts smiled widely and Reginald said, "Well, from the papers, it seems like your life has been moving at quite the pace, yes?"

Daphne smiled as she heard the soft pop of apparition again, and Harry excused himself. "Well, life has been hectic lately" Daphne



concurred, "but I wouldn't want anything different," and she smiled widely. She instinctively liked the Abbotts. Harry had been on the receiving end of a lecture the other day that this party was very important. These were people they would know and have to work with for a very long time. Some for the rest of their lives. It was helpful that the Abbotts were so agreeable.

Victoria adopted the expression of 'let's talk girl-talk' and said, "So, are you and your husband going to have a full wedding? You absolutely must. It will be the social event of the year!" Neville glanced at Reginald and they both moved off. The last Daphne heard was them discussing a hybrid Mandrake that had been developed in Peru. Apparently, Viscount Abbott was an amateur herbologist

Harry walked up with an elderly couple in tow. They must have easily been in their eighties if not nineties. He was a wizened man, scrawny and slightly stooped while she was not as weathered by age and still carried herself appropriate to her station, that is to say her nose was slightly lifted.

Victoria turned to Susan and began discussing the Abbotts favorite charity so Daphne could greet her guests. Harry said, "Daphne, I'd like to introduce to you Viscount and Viscountess Boot. My Lord, my Lady, my wife, Countess Potter."

George Boot executed a perfect bow over Daphne's extended hand and Grace Boot surprised Daphne by executing a slight curtsy. I know that we are senior to them, but still, this is fairly informal. Daphne inclined her head to Viscount Boot and gave a smaller curtsy to the Viscountess.

Daphne knew the game when she saw Grace give a slight twitch of her eyebrows, surprised that the teenaged wife from a family of no account actually knew her manners. Stodgy old bint. There was no request to be familiar from or to the older couple.

Before they could even begin a discussion, Dobby arrived with another couple, this one in their late middle age. He had enormous grey whiskers, unusual in magical society. She was dressed in an elegant dark green dress rimmed with gold. Harry began with the introductions again, "Daphne, I'd like to introduce to you Earl and Countess Jones. My Lord, my Lady, my lovely wife, Countess Potter."

Again, the perfect bow from him, but Countess Jones only inclined her head with a slight smile of acknowledgement. There was no mistaking the very evident hostility from the Joneses. They were both unsmiling and minimalistic in gesture as well as speech. In fact, neither had said a word at all.

"My Lord, my Lady, welcome to Rowan Hill," she said as pleasantly as she could muster. Just as she had instinctively liked the Abbotts, she instinctively disliked the Jones. Taking her own advice about cultivating long-term relationships, she said, "Please, call me Daphne."

Lady Jones' eyes widened in horror and she looked around nervously. Lord Jones merely looked at her with a faint expression of disappointment tinged with disgust before he belched out "How nice."

Turning to Harry, he said in a falsely jovial tone, "So, Potter. I knew your Father and Grandfather before you. Hope you can be half the man they were."

Harry's eyes narrowed at the insults to himself and his wife before he said in a bland tone, "Well Jones, I can but try." He took Daphne's arm and they smiled at the Joneses before they moved toward the last couple to join the party.

"Those...people," Daphne shrieked in a whisper.

"I know. I was about to throw him off the balcony, but was afraid you'd

tell me off for not making new allies." He gave her a roguish smile and squeezed her hand that was wrapped around his arm.

She took a cleansing breath and smiled gratefully at him. Approaching the last couple, who must be Baron and Baroness MacMillan, they saw what Ernie MacMillan must look like in thirty years. The resemblance was striking. After introductions, Baron MacMillan said, "Please, call me Richard and my wife Sarah."

"Thank you, I'm Daphne, my husband is, of course, Harry."

The MacMillans were a little stuffy, like Ernie, but still very likable people. They chatted for a bit, and eventually mixed with the other couples.

Neville and Reginald Abbott were in the process of becoming fast friends while Victoria Abbott was chewing the ear off old Lady Boot. Victoria caught up to Daphne as she walked by and said in an undertone, "She hates me. I'm far too talkative and have no decorum for her. I like to force myself on her for about ten minutes every time we meet up. The expressions of shock, indignation and embarrassment just tickle me pink."

Daphne couldn't help herself and burst into laughter. Covering her mouth, she grabbed the older woman by the arm and said, "You, madam are wonderful. I do believe that we shall get along."

"Don't get me wrong, there's a time and a place for everything. But here, where it's only the Fifteen and your husband's pick to be Minister," she raised her eyebrows at Daphne. "It's rather pretentious actually to be putting on airs. Then again, they are very much into blood status."

At the last statement, Daphne frowned and pursed her lips. Victoria laughed and said, "Not blood status as in what He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is about. Blood status as in who's the

Fifteen and who's not."

Daphne snorted and said in an undertone, "Then they should remember that we are Potter and Black."

"Yes" Victoria said in a slight smirk, "So too should that ass Jones."

"Is he always that rude?"

Victoria exhaled. "Well, he's been the only Earl seated for the last ten years or so. Harry and Neville should help put him into his place after a while. To answer your question; Yes he's always that rude" and she bubbled off in light laughter to her husband.

Dinner was announced and Daphne saw a bit of thunder on Lord Jones' face when Neville sat at Harry's right. Precedence was precedence though, and the cross man flopped into his seat at Daphne's right. Victoria was at her left and after the second course (a fabulous lobster bisque), gave Lady Potter a wink and said, "So, Daphne, how is it being married to the only man in the history of the Wizengamot that has two votes of the Fifteen?"

Out of the corner of her eye, Daphne saw Jones stiffen in remembrance of this important fact and she said, "Well, Harry and I have had many discussions and we want to proceed with proper deliberation. We realize that we don't have the experience that the long sitting members have, but at the same time, Harry and I have fairly strong feelings on some issues."

Jones put on his most agreeable face that still made Daphne want to smack him and said, "If I may ask, my Lady. What issues does your husband feel strongly about."

Great, another one who wants his wife in the Drawing Room for parties, the bedroom for an heir and out of sight all other times. "I would have to say the topic we feel strongest about is the

development of a situation wherein Lord Voldemort loses his life."

Jones shuddered at the hated name and Victoria gave a small 'eep'. Shortly, Jones collected himself and said, "Yes, well. Of course, everyone wants that upstart dealt with. 'Lord' indeed. Should toss him through the veil on that account alone."

Daphne smiled across the lip of her wine glass at the man. He wasn't odious, but very close to it. Maybe boorish, but not odious. Not yet, at least.

She looked down the other end of the table and saw a frustrated Harry attempting to hold a conversation with Lady Jones to no avail. After five minutes or so, he threw in the towel and chatted with Neville and Reginald Abbot for a while. Lady Boot watched it all with a condescending gaze.

Remove after remove, the pleasant members of the party 'ooh-ed' and 'aah-ed' over the meal. She watched as Amelia Bones engaged Lord Abbott about a matter of taxation and charities. It was well known the Abbotts were very involved with charity efforts to the point where the nouveau riche like the Malfoys and Parkinsons called them "The Beggar Family" despite the fact that Baron Abbott could probably purchase both families on a whim. They were heavily involved in a successful potion company and owned a string of apothecaries throughout Europe.

Eventually the dessert was served and everyone dug into his or her fruit dessert. As coffee was poured for afters the table talk became much more genial. Nothing warms up a crowd like an excellent meal.

Victoria leaned over and said, "We must do this again, it's been wonderful."

Daphne smiled back and watched as Harry rose. Smiling at everyone, he cleared his throat and said, "My Lords, my Ladies, and Director.

Thank you all for coming this evening, it's been wonderful to get to know you all in a much less constraining situation. Hopefully, this will be the first of many gatherings here at Rowan Hill." He was making the right noises and smoothing the right ruffles all the while saying nothing of real political import.

Laughing at something Reginald Abbott said, he continued, "My wife and I have thoroughly enjoyed ourselves this evening and hope to work with you all in a spirit of goodwill and a brotherhood of a kind." He retook his seat to smiles from most of those attending and a few speculative looks from the Boot and Jones contingent. Stunningly, Lady Jones had a small smile.

Daphne rose, the gentlemen following suit. She led the ladies to the After Dinner Drawing Room while the gentlemen enjoyed their port. Lady Boot was silent in the drawing room but Lady Jones engaged Daphne and Victoria on possible dates and designs for a formal wedding. The ladies all agreed that Rowan Hill would be a spectacular location for a winter wedding.

Susan, her Aunt and Sarah MacMillan were discussing a new medical treatment. It turned out that Lady MacMillan was also 'Healer MacMillan'. Sarah was a muggleborn witch who fell in love with her husband when she was apprenticing with Madam Pomfrey and a young Beater from Hufflepuff was brought in on a stretcher. Richard MacMillan admits that he was never any great shakes on a broom but "thanks my lucky stars that I had the wonderful idea of playing Quidditch."

The gentlemen did not linger long. Harry and Neville had planned to quash any serious political discussion until they were more up to speed on the issues and some of the 'ins and outs' of their new role. Shortly after the men came in, Lord and Lady Boot made their adieus.

After bowing over Daphne's hand, Lord Boot said, "My Lord, it has

been a wonderful dinner tonight. I remember dining here with your grandfather and I have high hopes for you. Good evening." Lady Boot made the appropriate noises and they left for the Entry Hall and apparated away.

In fits and starts, the couples made their way home. The Joneses must have recognized their earlier self-defeating faux pas and made a significant effort to be nice to Harry and Daphne. At one point, she and Harry were alone for a second and she said, "Is it just me, or are Lord and Lady Jones sucking up to us so much that I need to worry about love bites?"

Harry almost spit out his coffee and after regaining his composure said, "No, it's not just you. But if you like, I can give you a love bite or two later on."

She just smiled and surreptitiously squeezed his bum.

Eventually, it was just the Potters, Neville and the Boneses. As they all flopped down onto couches and chairs, Harry and Neville simultaneously began to loosen their ties. Daphne just smiled and then said, "Dobby, Solly!"

The two elves appeared in unison, Dobby still in his miniature tuxedo, Solly in a clean tea towel with the Longbottom crest. Dobby immediately bowed low while Solly curtsied, and intoned, "How can we serve, Mistress?"

"Dobby, Solly thank you so very much for all your hard work. Tonight was a wonderful evening thanks to your hard work. Many of our guests complemented your cooking, the house was immaculate and everything went very well."

Solly stood there stock still, stunned into immobility. Dobby got a tear in his eye and muttered, "Mistress is too kind to poor Dobby." He looked to Harry and said, "Dobby being thanking you Harry Potter Sir

for marrying wonderful Mistress." With that, he popped away.

Solly still stood there and glanced to Neville who nodded to her. She curtsied again and with a panicked expression, popped away as well.

Amelia looked around and said, "It's been a wonderful and enlightening evening, but I'm bushed. I'll see you all in the morning."

AN

1. I own nothing.

2. The power varying exercises, I've lifted directly from The Obsidian Warlock's most excellent fic, "More Equal Than You Know."

3. Magical Levels (most powerful to least): Mage, Grand Sorcerer/Sorceress, Sorcerer/Sorceress, Master Magician, Magician

4. The Fifteen and their ages (in order of precedence):

Earl Harry Potter, age 15, spouse Countess Daphne Potter, age 16

Earl Neville Longbottom, age 15, no spouse

Earl Raymond Jones, age 64, spouse Countess Mary Jones, age 64

Viscount Reginald Abbott, age 40, spouse Viscountess Victoria Abbott, age 35

Viscountess Susan Bones, age 16, no spouse

Viscount George Boot, age 90, spouse Viscountess Grace Boot, age 88

Baron Richard MacMillan, age 45, spouse Baroness Sarah



MacMillan, age 42

5. I did a bit of research on a seven-course meal and below is the meal for the Fifteen.

1st course. Appetizer: Wild Green & Baby White Asparagus w/ Morels, Morel Sauce & Lemon

2nd course. Soup: Lobster Bisque

3rd course. Salad: Foie Gras Salad w/ Jicama, French Beans and Arugula, Truffle Vinaigrette

4th course. Sorbet to cleanse the palate: Lemon Sorbet

5th course. Meat (poultry): Rare Grilled Duck Breast w/ Duck Confit & Julienne Veggie Salad, Duck Sauce & Blackberries

6th course. Red meat or fish: Roasted Tenderloin of Beef w/ Potato, Fennel, Leek & Artichoke 'Ragout', French Beans and Truffle Sauce

7th course. Lemoncello Panna Cotta w/ Blueberry Compote or Strawberry Triple Crown w/ Strawberry Sorbet

## Chapter 7

22 July 1996 Saturday

Training continued apace after the big dinner party. Harry was still having a hard time controlling the power in his spells. On Friday morning, Flitwick had the students in a dueling ring so they could get a feel for an opponent who could cast spells very quickly. Dodging, conjuring and shielding, Harry finally had enough and before he could stop himself, cast a silent stunner that caught the Charms Professor full in the chest and knocked him back into the wall. Everyone stood still for a heartbeat before Daphne ran to the Professor and cast "Ennervate," to no effect.

Casting it repeatedly with no effect, she began to fret. Harry gently moved her out of the way and cast the Reviving spell himself. Flitwick twitched and groaned. Rubbing his face, he said, "Mr. Potter, nicely cast. Good aim. Power level was inappropriate. Getting better young man, now back in the ring."

Saturday morning arrived and after their workout, which Susan and Neville had finally agreed to join, Daphne said, "Let's go do something today. Not in Diagon Alley."

Harry's face lit up and said, "Pleasure Beach Blackpool." The other three's face went blank, and he said, "Trust me. We're going to have a blast."

Harry and Neville jumped in the Floo to get some Pounds from Gringotts while the ladies dressed for the day. Susan and Daphne were ready by the time the lads returned. Harry grabbed the general Floo directory, was searching through the Lancashire listing, and stabbed his finger at the book saying, "The Pig and the Fairy."

Now thoroughly bewildered, Daphne said, "What is a Pleasure Beach Blackpool? What is 'The Pig and the Fairy'? We're not going

anywhere otherwise Mister Potter."

With a half smile, Harry gave her puppy dog eyes and said, "Trust me? It'll be fun," under his breath he continued, "I've heard."

Daphne looked to Susan and Neville who both shrugged. With a bit of disgruntlement, she strode to the fireplace, grabbed some Floo powder and shouted out "The Pig and the Fairy!" As she spun away, she thought to herself, What a ridiculous name for a pub.

She popped out in a smaller copy of the Leaky Cauldron. Daphne had to do a quick double check that the bald man behind the bar wasn't the famous Tom. Joined shortly by Harry, Neville and Susan, a grinning Harry said, "Follow me."

After a quick cab ride, they piled out at the front gates of an amusement park. "Britain's Largest Tourist attraction, or so they advertise," said Harry coming up behind them. "Come on" and he grabbed Daphne's hand and dragged her into the park.

An hour later, Daphne was dragging Harry back to the Valhalla. She loved the dark spookiness of the ride which was eerily accurate in it's depiction of Norse magical constructs and beliefs. Plus it was dark and she had kissed Harry until his toes curled.

Susan and Neville were currently screaming their lungs out on the Infusion roller coaster. Harry stopped and pointed at their friends who were currently suspended over a large body of water. "I never in a million years would have guessed Neville would have got on that ride."

Daphne rolled her eyes at her husband and said, "Even if his almost girlfriend asked him to?"

With a goofy smile, he said, "Point. Come on, woman; let's go ride this Valhalla again."

Later in the day, as they ate bratwursts and chips at one of the concessions, Daphne leaned into Harry and in a soft voice, said, "Thanks for this. It's been great." Neville and Susan both nodded their agreement and Harry gave an 'Aw shucks' smile before downing his fizzy drink in one go. After a soft burp, he checked the map of the park in his hand and said, "Come on, I want to go ride the bumper cars."

"The what?" asked Neville.

This day was the beginning of the high point of their summer.

.oOo.

24 July 1996 Monday

Today's training had been brutal. Flitwick had them casting illusions followed by attacking a simulated opponent, switching to shields, re-attacking all the while maintaining control over the illusion to distract the simulated opponent. The Charms Master's Pinching hex was cast quite liberally.

"It's not that hard," Daphne had said to Harry. "Power wise, these are actually fairly low power; it's a matter of concentration."

Harry waved his hand in frustration. Once she had the hang of it, this multiple manipulation of illusion and spell had come easy to her. Harry was having a much harder time splitting his attention in an efficient and effective manner. His illusion usually petered out, or froze in place after a while. If he focused on his illusion, he was invariably hit by spellfire quickly as he wasn't paying enough attention to his opponent.

So far, he'd used his excess power to overcome this. He'd been blasting anything in sight back to the mid 1300's.

Daphne sat back in her chair, thinking. They were waiting for Neville to return from Green Hill. They had a reporter from the Prophet coming over in an hour for the big interview. "Try this," she said. "Levitate the vase," she indicated a small vase on a bookshelf, "and work your Magicus Intimus exercises at the same time."

Harry nodded and drew his wand. After a quick swish and flick, he closed his eyes and dove into himself. Just yesterday, he and Daphne had tried the exercise without casting the spell on themselves and found it unneeded. Diving into the black velvety darkness, the repetitive beating sound rose up all around him. Through the sound, he was noticeably aware of his concurrent spell, which surprised him.

Daphne watched the vase hover in front of her husband. Every so often, it would twitch, usually in time with a small frown on his face. It dipped and swayed but after approximately ten minutes, it hovered steadily between them.

Harry opened his eyes and saw the vase still hovering. Smiling widely, he reached out and grabbed the vase, canceling the charm. "There" Daphne said with conviction, "Now you know you can do it. No more excuses, mister," she mock waggled her finger at him. Harry chuckled and was replacing the vase when a soft crack heralded the arrival of the current Head of House Longbottom.

Neville didn't come in the Drawing Room at first, but fifteen minutes later; he and Susan came in, holding hands. Daphne raised her eyebrows in question to Susan and got a smile in return. From her left, Harry muttered, "About time you two."

"Sorry, mate," said Neville with a smile. "Not all of us have the gumption to marry our girl ninety six hours after kissing her." The ladies laughed while Harry smiled and shot Neville the bird, causing more laughter.

Susan leaned on Neville and became serious, "I know what we've talked about; focusing on the conduct of the war and how Fudge is not the right person to do that. Do we want to discuss how orphans are dealt with?" She looked directly at Harry when asking the question, knowing it was a tender subject.

Harry leaned back in his chair, exhaling loudly. "Wow. This is a great opportunity to address what happened to me, but what does the law say? I have no idea how it ought to be handled."

"The orphaned child will go to their closest living relative by blood or marriage unless the parents' will stipulates differently. If neither is present, then the Office of Child Services in the DMLE arranges a fosterage. There are rules and guidelines to ensure that the orphan has a suitable fosterage."

Harry gaped at Neville. "How did you know all that?"

He shrugged, "Looked it up after we talked that time on the balcony. I realized I had no idea how it was supposed to work."

Harry nodded and said, "To be honest, the law seems right to me. Dumbledore just circumvented the whole parents' will aspect for me. At least I'm assuming my parents' will would have sent me to Sirius or someone else."

Susan nodded, looking at her new boyfriend with a bit more regard than before. "I have to agree, the law seems fair. How about a plea to parents to ensure they have wills in place that deals with guardianship of their children?"

"I like that." They all nodded.

A few minutes later, the Floo roared and disgorged James Shanahan, Daily Prophet reporter. The young Irishman was escorted into the

Drawing Room by Dobby. Harry rose to greet the man and after shaking his hand, made the necessary introduction.

"Thank you my Lords, my Lady for this opportunity to sit down and discuss current events with you. Our readers are very curious how the newest members of the Fifteen shall be shaping our society. Especially with a majority vote sitting in the room."

"Yes, well let's get on then," said Neville.

Shanahan set up a long scroll of parchment and a dictation quill. In his lap, he had a muggle pad of paper. "Well, then, my Lord Potter what is your current estimation of where Wizarding society stands today."

Daphne converted her laugh into a small cough and covered her mouth with her hand. If you had that truthful answer Shanahan, you'd sell out six printings.

Harry glanced at Daphne and gave her a small smile. "Well, the most important issue at hand is the elimination of the threat of Voldemort and his Death Eaters." Neville and Susan nodded soberly at that statement while Shanahan winced at the name. "This evil cancer on our society is the first and foremost issue in front of us today."

Neville spoke up and said, "I cannot agree strongly enough with Lord Potter. All three of our families have been decimated by this scourge, leaving us orphans. How many more children must grow up without parents? Why is our Ministry not actively prosecuting this stain on our society?" Neville threw his hands up in a gesture of frustration and disgust.

"Given my position, I know that that the current law enforcement capability of the Ministry is sorely lacking in order to hunt down the vermin that posture themselves as the Death Eaters who follow their psychotic leader.

"The denial and lunacy espoused by Minister Fudge, Undersecretary Umbridge and others in the Fudge administration make us all wonder what the Minister and his direct support staff were thinking. This is a monster and his monstrous followers that cut a swath through Britain and parts of the Continent during his last reign of terror," Susan finished with a bit of heat and a tinge of red in her cheeks.

Shanahan looked like Christmas, Easter and his birthday had all arrived on the same day carried by a buxom blonde. He scribbled on his pad and checked the scroll to ensure the dictation quill was getting all this.

After a slight pause, he asked, "So, what would you have done?"

Without missing a beat, Harry said, "Oust Minister Fudge and replace him with Director Bones."

Shanahan goggled, and then looked to Neville and Susan for concurrence. Neville said, "Most definitely," while Susan merely nodded.

"Mary and Patrick, this is going to be a big one," the man muttered.

"What do you want done with the...He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and his followers?"

"The veil or the kiss," Neville said without hesitation.

Daphne was smiling openly now. She could have danced a naked jig and the reporter would not have noticed, so focused was he on the other three. They had all talked about the expected questions and their answers. Daphne had insisted that Neville and Susan establish very strong positions on many things, but Harry must be the one to call unequivocally for Fudge's head with the other two concurring. So far, the three members of the Fifteen were carrying themselves well



and Shanahan responded to it.

Susan waved her hands for emphasis, "Instead of the corruption and bribery that allowed many Death Eaters to escape justice when Lord Potter stopped their monstrous leader last time, we must have justice. For example, I understand that some charms specialists have theorized that the Dark Mark can only be taken willingly. If so, why is there a debate over a marked Death Eater's guilt or innocence? The person is guilty and deserves the most severe punishment possible."

Daphne nodded. Now they were leveling their guns at 'unnamed persons' who were in all actuality, named. Malfoy, Nott, Crabbe, Goyle, Macnair, Pettigrew. Shanahan realized this and said, "You could be making some serious enemies with these positions."

Harry laughed out loud while the other two chuckled. "Voldemort himself has tried to kill me five times since I was one. Do you really think his followers scare me more than him?"

Neville and Susan nodded in concurrence. "I will not bow to them," Harry said in a commanding tone that caused all present to sit up a little straighter in their seats.

The interview finished up in the same vein and at the end, Susan made her plea for parents to ensure they had up to date wills that addressed their children's guardianship. "The three of us are orphans, let's all of us be prepared if the worst should happen."

Shanahan made abbreviated goodbyes and nearly ran to the fireplace to write up his notes for tomorrow's paper. As he used the Floo, Harry took him off the access list of the wards. Daphne nodded at his action while Neville looked at him quizzically.

With a grim expression, Harry said, "No one has access to our home that doesn't need it."

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25 July 1996 Tuesday

## FIFTEEN CALLS FOR BONES AS MINISTER

"Well, the Prophet isn't going for understatement today, are they?" The four friends had finished their workout and were eating breakfast on the veranda. When Harry sat down, a peeved Amelia Bones had tossed the paper to him.

Harry smiled at her and said, "Something on your mind Director?"

"Yes, there is my Lord," her sarcasm on his title wasn't lost on any present. "I wish you would have discussed this with me before you effectively nominated me for the post."

Daphne rolled her eyes and said, "Please, Amelia. Methinks she doth protest too much. You're the director of the largest department in the ministry. You've risen from the Auror ranks to said position in only twenty years. Somehow, I don't think you'd turn down the Minister's job."

With a smirking smile, Amelia said, "Of course I wouldn't." Turning back to Harry, she half-growled at him, "But that doesn't mean I wouldn't have liked a heads up first!"

The five all laughed at that and ate up a hearty Dobby breakfast. Over the weekend, Daphne had approached Dobby about some help for him with the care of the Potter and Black estates.

He'd been quite scared at first. "Mistress, Dobby is sorry. Dobby will work harder."

She'd done her best to calm and reassure him that she only wanted to get him assistance, not a replacement. "We'd be lost without you

taking care of us Dobby. I was thinking that you might like an elf to take care of the grounds for you, or do the cleaning or the cooking, leaving the rest for you."

With a look of abashed hope, he said, "Could Mistress get an elf to keep the grounds?"

She smiled and put her hand on Dobby's shoulder, "We'll have help here before the week is out." The new elf, Nob, had come highly recommended from the Longbottoms.

Flitwick had a conflict this day, so they had the morning off until eleven when Minerva McGonagall apparated into the Entry Hall. Harry was in the library reading the journal of the Potter Heads while Daphne read Uses of Atlantean Runes in Ward Constructs while her feet were propped in Harry's lap. Neville napped, his head in Susan's lap, while she read The Jungle Books by Rudyard Kipling.

Harry and Daphne both quizzed her on the book and she had gushed, "You have to read this book. It's really a collection of related short stories, but it's wonderful. The descriptions are so vivid, the characters so real, the stories and settings so evocative. The lead and the supporting cast are likable, yet not perfect. You absolutely have to read this book when I'm done. It also has some of the best lines I've ever read. 'We be of one blood you and I. Good Hunting!' and many others."

McGonagall arrived at that point and sat in her trademark conjured hardback chair. Susan shook Neville awake and after she gave them all a moment to gather themselves, she said, "We don't have time to work on the Animagus transformation. The process can take years to complete. The situation remains, however, that the four of you can benefit from having an animal form for escape or combat. I've taken the liberty of asking an old friend of mine if he could help."

Now everyone's interest was piqued and the Transfiguration Mistress

continued. "There are two ways for a Witch or Wizard to shift their shape into that of an animal while maintaining their consciousness. The Animagus transformation and what is called Shapeshifting. The Animagus transformation is possible for certain persons who have what is called the potential of an animal residing within them. The purpose of the extensive training is twofold. First to master the Transfiguration magic necessary and second to subdue the animal within, so that the Witch or Wizard will not fundamentally change when they accomplish the change."

The four nodded and then looked at Susan. She smiled and said, "We be of one blood, you and I."

McGonagall looked at the Lady Bones and chose to ignore the comment. "Shapeshifting" she continued, "is very different. It's actually much more spiritual than magical. Most magical cultures believe that the Ka of an animal is released into the world when the animal's body dies. Ka is understood as the essence, spirit or even soul of the beast. The spirit then waits for an opportunity to be reborn. There is a ritual which will allow a Wizard or Witch to open themselves to the spirit realm and invite the Ka of an animal into their body. It is believed that the Witch or Wizard is judged and only can Shapeshift if they are found worthy by the Ka of the animal that joins with them."

The older woman shook her head at the idea of the process. "The Witch or Wizard will then immediately be able to shift to an animal form with very little training. They will be really letting the animal within surface. Since you all have some Occlumency training, it should not be difficult for you to maintain your self awareness."

Harry nodded and shifted his gaze when Daphne said, "Sounds intriguing Professor. What's the drawback?"

With a thin smile the Professor said, "Indeed, Mrs. Potter, there is a drawback. Since the Ka of the animal is still strong and vibrant, the

Witch or Wizard will most likely change in their personality. For some there are fundamental changes, for others that are already strong willed, the changes can be minor." Looking around the group, she said, "I want you all to be aware that you will change in your personality. You don't have to do this."

The students all sat back at the same time and adopted the same contemplative expressions. Minerva would have laughed, had she not wanted to give them some measure of privacy with their thoughts.

After a few minutes, Harry looked to his wife. Daphne gave a nod and short shrug. Looking over at his friends, he found Neville grinning at him and Susan with a serious expression that spelled out "Let's Do This" in letters a mile high.

Returning his gaze to his Professor, he smiled and said, "When can we perform the ritual Professor?"

McGonagall returned his smile and said, "Tomorrow."

.oOo.

Early in the afternoon, Daphne found Harry sitting on the veranda reading the journal of the Potter Heads. She took his book and plopped on his lap. He chuckled as she cuddled up to him, ducking her head under his chin.

"You Ok?"

She nodded and said, "Can't a girl just want to be close to her guy?"

With a contented sigh, he wrapped his arms around her and they sat there, enjoying the weather. Harry watched a brown owl approaching and nudged his wife. She sat up as the messenger landed on the table, extending its leg.

Feeding the owl a treat from his pocket, Harry opened the letter. After a moment reading it, he snorted and said, "Listen to this. Apparently Lord Jones is blaming me for the headline that the Fifteen want Fudge out. He's rather upset and wants to inform me that Fudge has been very good for the Wizarding economy; providing a high growth environment that has led to capital gains for investors and employment opportunities for many."

Shaking her head Daphne said, "Translation: he's made a killing because of Fudge's policies and doesn't want the golden goose to get cooked."

Harry nodded in agreement. "Blah, blah, money, no experience, need to learn, and blah, blah...here's something. Almost a threat."

Daphne sat up straight and tried to read the letter over his shoulder. "He reminds me that the Black, Potter, Bones and Longbottom votes do technically qualify as a majority per Wizengamot rules, but so too do Jones, Boot, MacMillan and Abbott."

Daphne snorted. "Like Reginald Abbott would go along with anything Jones says." She paused, her eyes getting a far away look. "Then again, he might. I need to get a history of the voting history of the Fifteen. See what their interests have been."

Harry nodded, "England has no eternal allies, only eternal interests?"

Daphne nodded and scratched out a note to herself.

.oOo.

That evening, Duncan Davis arrived precisely at eight o'clock for their weekly Occlumency lesson and discussion. The dignified old man took up his spot in the Drawing Room and smiled at his students.

"Based on our discussion via the Floo, I believe you have made great strides." He paused while sipping his tea. "You have probably deduced that the percussive-type noise you hear while meditating is your magical core. The resonance with your own senses gives it shape and sound."

He paused and played with the arm of his chair for a long moment. Daphne was fully engrossed and the old man said, "In your attempts to 'grasp' your magic, you have been rendered unconscious, yes?"

The Potters nodded in response and the old man nodded in return, as if they had confirmed an hypothesis of his. "This...situation, is usually experienced by persons that are very strong magically. Shortly, it will become possible to embrace your magic, which is the entire purpose of the exercise, of course. Just like getting into a hot bath, at first it's too hot, but after a few moments your body adjusts to the temperature."

Harry was frowning in recollection and Daphne was tapping her chin with her nails. Davis chuckled and said, "I wouldn't be too worried, with the rapidity you two have progressed, for you to embrace your cores this evening wouldn't surprise me. Once you have a solid Magicus Intimus, practical Occlumency isn't far off. Of course, your shields will not be completely solid at first, that ability comes with time."

Harry shrugged to his wife in a 'well, let's see' type of way and Davis said, "Good, let's begin our meditation, but I want you to attempt it without the spell."

26 July 1996 Wednesday

An integral aspect of the Shapeshifting ritual is for the person to be brought to their primal self. Therefore, all four were to fast from food and water until they were to perform the ritual at sundown.

After an abbreviated workout, Harry and Daphne went for a meandering stroll about the estate. They stopped, watching a brook bubble its way down its course. Daphne put her head on her husband's shoulder.

"I'm scared," he said.

"Of what?"

Taking a deep breath, Harry said, "I'm afraid that I'll change so much that you won't love me any more."

Daphne looked at him, horrified at his suggestion. As the words to refute his fear rose to her lips, they fell away as the truth spread across her like an old blanket. Her shoulders dropped and she pulled him close.

"I know. I feel the same."

He pulled back and looked her in the eye. "You don't have to do this."

She half-heartedly glared at him and said, "Yes, I do and you know I do."

His head dropped and he gently turned her around and pulled her close; her back snuggled to his chest. They sat in silence for five minutes or so when she said the word that he had been contemplating. "Partners."

He nodded, "I believe that our work in the Wizengamot won't be enough to 'vanquish' Voldemort. We're going to have to give him a good old-fashioned killing and the Shapeshifting ability is part of that. The feral part of the war to complement the high society and politics I guess you could say. I suppose that I could attempt to go this alone, but I don't think that I'm capable of that."



She half turned and looked at him questioningly.

"You're part of me now. Regardless of my wants and desires, we're together, Partners in every sense of the word. I need you as much as you need me." He sighed and kissed her neck.

Turning, she hugged him close as the water bubbled on its way, heedless of the concerns and trials of the bystanders.

.oOo.

At three o'clock, the fireplace roared and disgorged Minerva McGonagall and a tall thin man with long dark hair tied back in a long ponytail. Finding the four friends on the veranda, Minerva and the newcomer joined them and sat, the man placing his large satchel on the ground next to his chair.

"Everyone, this is Joseph Redhawk. He lives in Manitoba, Canada and is the specialist that I referred to yesterday."

The man nodded to everyone, but remained silent. Minerva asked how everyone felt and if they were all still committed to the ritual. During the light conversation, Daphne watched Redhawk. He was observing each of the students intently. Evaluating their personality, judging their fitness for the Shapeshifting ritual maybe.

When her electric blue eyes met with his ebony colored eyes there was a shock that jolted Daphne almost out of her seat. She felt like she'd been given a complete physical by a Healer, but instead of Redhawk evaluating her physical well being, he was evaluating her spiritual wellbeing. Was she worthy of welcoming and using the Ka of a spirit, possibly even a great predator?

His slightly upturned mouth told her the answer. Yes, she was worthy. But just barely.

During a lull in the conversation, Redhawk said his first words since arriving, "I need to prepare the site. It should be enclosed in your woods, but the clearing should be at least thirty yards in any direction."

Harry thought for a moment and said, "Follow me."

Daphne watched the two men walk off, wondering about the quiet man named Redhawk.

.oOo.

Just before sunset, the four friends arrived at a large clearing in the woods at the base of Snowdon. Redhawk had cut all the grass low and sprinkled arrowroot in rune shapes and surrounded each rune cluster with chalked concentric circles. Around it all was a large circle of salt. As they took in the designs, Harry poked Daphne in the side and motioned toward the edges of the clearing.

Redhawk had constructed a large fence to enclose the entire clearing and as they watched, he closed off the entrance they had just used. Responding to Harry's quizzical expression, Redhawk muttered, "Need to keep you inside in case the animal takes over completely." A few flicks of his wand and a translucent dome shimmered into life over their heads.

McGonagall had advised them to wear old clothing so they all stood there in their grubbies, waiting somewhat nervously for the ritual to begin. McGonagall picked up a small bowl and began to paint runes on their forehead, shoulders, chest and legs. After they were all anointed, each was directed to a different circle; Harry at the twelve o'clock position, Daphne at three, Neville at six and Susan at nine. Joseph stood in the middle.

"Do not leave your circle, no matter what happens. This will most

likely hurt, but do not leave the circle. Remember what you discussed with Minerva. Complete the transformation, wait until the pain subsides and then transform back."

Nods all around and the students all sat cross-legged in the middle of their circles and commenced their meditative states. As the disc of the sun began to be cut by the horizon, Daphne felt the pain begin to well up in her. Joseph was chanting in a language she'd never heard while the pain began to sharpen and it felt like she was being bent and pulled; examined in every aspect.

The pain grew. Her back felt like the flesh was being stripped off and her head was in a vise. When she thought she couldn't take it anymore, the pain stopped and faded away as quickly as it arrived. For a moment, she sat there, panting. Her throat felt raw and she realized she must have been screaming.

Opening her eyes, she saw her husband and friends in a similar position. Susan was rubbing her face while Neville and Harry just panted. She met Harry's eyes, he gave her a pained smile, and mouthed, "I love you," when she was hit with a piercing pain that lifted her up, thrusting her chest up and outward. It felt like two spears were being shoved through her back. The agony continued and spread through her whole body. Her legs felt as though they'd been shattered with a sledgehammer and her face ached as if she'd been beaten with a billy club.

Standing in front of her, she could clearly see Joseph as he continued the chant. In a matter of seconds, her vision sharpened to the point where she felt she could count the hairs on his head. She fell forward on her arms and her screams roughened and sharpened.

Scents assaulted her like waves pounding in the surf. Noises from the smallest insect in the clearing to an owl in a tree three miles away bombarded her. Like a light being extinguished, the pain cut off. Her body ached and she could only stay on all fours, panting.

McGonagall approached and with a small smile conjured a mirror in front of her.

In the mirror stood an amber-eyed Grey Wolf. I'm a wolf, she thought in stunned amazement. Deep inside her, she felt the pull of the night, to run and hunt. Find her pack and her mate. Hearing a snarl, she turned to her right, where Harry had been sitting. Her canine muzzle opened in shock. Snarling and growling, there stood a Bengal Tiger. A sharp Keeee tugged her attention to Susan's position across from her and she saw a large Red-Tailed Hawk with its wings opened for balance. Completing the circuit, she turned to her left and saw a huge Grizzly Bear in place of Neville, wuffling and examining its paws.

Redhawk's voice cut through her contemplation. "Now, feel yourselves, become aware of the beast that has judged you worthy. Accept them into you as they have chosen you." He paused for a long time and then continued, "Now, reach inside yourselves, find your magic and become human again."

Diving into her *Magicus Intimus*, she quickly found herself surrounded by the noise of her magic, but now there was another, overlying sound. A rhythmic sound like the sound of horses hooves as it gallops – or the sound of a wolf chasing its prey. Throwing herself into the drum like noise, she found herself straightening and lengthening. There was little pain; it was a hard to pinpoint discomfort that left as soon as she had identified it.

Opening her eyes, she saw Harry sitting in his circle panting, but with an enormous smile on his face. Neville was halfway back to his human form, but Susan was still a hawk. Joseph walked up to her and said, "Come back to us, lady. Return to your true self."

The hawk opened its wings again and screeched at him loudly. McGonagall approached the hawk from behind, her wand out. Joseph mumbled some very colorful curses, drew his wand and

muttered "Legilimens." A full minute passed before Susan began to transform back to her human self.

She sat there for a minute, sweat pouring down her face. Brushing her hair out of her eyes, Susan looked up at Joseph and nodded to him as if to say, "I'm Ok now." He regarded her for a long moment and then said "Transform back" to all.

Daphne closed her eyes and immediately was in the *Magicus Intimus* state. She embraced what she now identified as The Wolf and felt herself directly begin to transform. This time, there was no pain and she kept her eyes closed, feeling the wolf emerge from within. Opening her eyes, she saw the tiger, bear and hawk also looking around. Her mouth dropped open in a canid grin. Joseph and McGonagall inspected each one of them before he said, "Transform."

Reversing the process, she embraced what she now called My Magic. Her transformation back to human was much quicker, and she kept her eyes open this time to watch the others. Harry transformed very quickly, in the blink of an eye. It looked like Neville melted from his bear form to human. Susan seemed to blur from her hawk form to human.

By now, they'd all caught their wind and sat their grinning at each other. "You are all great predators, what non-magical scientists call Apex Predators. This is unusual, but use the gift well."

Joseph looked at McGonagall and shrugged and she did something that surprised the four students by laughing out loud. After a moment, she said, "If you'd like to go play in your new forms, have fun," and the shimmering dome disappeared along with the fencing.

Daphne immediately embraced The Wolf and stood, watching the tiger approach her. They smelled each other and she straight away identified the *Panthera Tigris* in front of her as Harry. It was not just the intellectual understanding that the animal was Harry, but there

was a deep seeded knowing within her that she couldn't identify, but trusted nonetheless that the scent she smelled was Harry's.

She lifted her head to the night sky and howled the cry of good hunting. She heard Harry bound away, pursued by the surprisingly nimble great bear. With a rustle of wings, Susan flew after them. Daphne finished her call and dashed off into the night.

.oOo.

A little after midnight, the howl of a wolf sounded across the estate of Rowan Hill. A large hawk settled on an empty flower urn on the veranda of the house, watching imperiously over the grounds.

Soundlessly, a tiger stalked into view and flopped down at the base of the stone steps. A huge blondish-brown bear with an enormous hump on its back strode up the stairs and sat on its hindquarters.

The wolf called again, nearby this time and finished the howl with a yip. Suddenly there was a Grey Wolf licking the tiger's face. The wolf transformed into a young woman. Daphne leaned into the five hundred pound predator and whispered, "Come to bed, lover."

In a blink of the eye, the tiger became Harry Potter and he took his wife's hand as they headed in the house. Passing the bear and hawk without a second glance, he called back, "'Night Neville, Susan."

Once in the master suite, Daphne grabbed Harry by the shirt and kissed him passionately. The sound of tearing cloth bore witness to his overwhelming desire for her as he ripped her old T-shirt off her body.

He groaned aloud as she bit him on the shoulder and then found herself in the air as he threw her on the bed. Seconds later, they were divested of their clothes and attacked one another. Groans and moans filled the room as nips and bites supplemented raking nails.

Finally, he pinned her beneath him and she almost screamed, "Now, take me NOW."

Thirty minutes later, they lay there panting and covered in sweat. "If this is one of those changes that McGonagall was talking about, I'm very Ok with it," said Daphne.

Harry chuckled and pulled her close as they drifted off to sleep.

.oOo.

27 July 1996 Thursday

Daphne looked up from his breakfast and saw an owl approaching the window of the Family Dining Room. With the persistent rain that had started up in the night, the foursome had run on the treadmills in the exercise room. Daphne decided it was the most boring thing she'd ever done.

The dark grey owl alighted on the table next to Harry and extended its leg. Taking the missive and sharing his sausage, Harry read the letter.

"Humph. Looks like the vote of No Confidence is scheduled today at noon."

He looked across the table at Amelia who had a considering expression. She cocked an eyebrow at him when she noticed him watching her.

With a small smile, he said, "Will you be ready, Madam Minister-to-be?"

She tossed her napkin at him and rose. "Scamp. I'll see you at noon or thereabouts."

.oOo.

It was a rather short session. By 12:15, Amelia Bones had replaced Cornelius Fudge as the Minister for Magic, effective at noon the following day.

"...Our society deserves to have a Ministry that will provide safety." They had written his speech after breakfast, but he had left the prepared remarks behind minutes ago and was speaking from the heart. "Our society deserves a Ministry that will provide equal opportunity to all. Our society deserves a Ministry that will provide a bulwark against evil, against oppression, against terror."

Harry paused, taking a breath as he engaged each Member with his eyes, daring them to look away. "I have seen this evil. I have fought this evil. It will not fade away if we ignore it. It will not leave us alone if we leave it alone. In the end, evil only will respond to one thing: the Flaming Sword of Justice. Nothing less.

"Our society deserves justice. Our society deserves an efficient, effective government." He made a long dramatic pause, looked directly at Amelia, gestured with his open hand and said, "Our society deserves Amelia Bones."

Daphne watched from the visitors' gallery and smiled as the absolute silence pervaded the Wizengamot chamber. Harry took his seat with a rustle of his ornate robes. From his left, Neville began to clap slowly, each sharp sound reverberating about the ancient stone chamber.

Reginald Abbott took up the rhythm followed quickly by Sir Thomas Davies on the opposite side of the chamber. Like a fire slowly kindling, the applause slowly spread around the chamber until a full minute later, the seats seemed to shake with the roar of the applause. Lady Augusta sat next to Daphne, her usual seat, clapping to beat the band, tears standing in her eyes.



The old woman looked at Daphne and said, "He reminds me so much of his grandfather, Charlus. He was one of the best men I've ever known. He gives them all hope. Most out there remember Charlus and who he was. What he stood for."

To her surprise, she saw Dumbledore clapping and then rise to continue. He was the last person she expected to give an ovation for anything Harry had to say, yet here he was, leading an ovation and the smooth election of Amelia Bones to the post of Minister for Magic.

After the session was called to a close, Daphne joined Harry on the floor of the chambers. It wasn't unusual for family members to join the Member on the floor. Usually it was the spouse or heir. It was a common practice for an elderly member to have their heir sit with them, silent and watching, for many years before either dying or yielding the seat.

Surreptitiously holding her husband's hand, Daphne listened to the conversation he was having with Lord Jones. Actually, Harry was on the receiving end of a monologue from the older man. It was evident that Harry's patience was fraying; his jaws were clenched and he looked at the floor as if he was trying to find a lost dust mite. Jones' prattle continued in an attempt to 'educate his newest colleague'. Finally, Harry had enough and said, "My Lord, excuse me" and without waiting for a response he walked away, Daphne in tow.

"You alright there?"

"He's such a pompous ass I can't even believe it." Harry ran his free hand through his hair.

Furrowing her brow at his agitation, she linked her arm in his and leaned into him. "I love you."

He stopped and smiled. "Thanks, I love you too."

She squeezed his arm but her smile quickly became a frown as over Harry's shoulder she saw the Chief Warlock approaching. She indicated with a nod, Harry turned and sighed. "What now?" he asked in an undertone.

"Be nice. He's a bastard but we must be nice in public."

"Yes, dear" he replied in a humorous mocking tone.

"My Lord," said Dumbledore in an unusually restrained tone.

"Chief Warlock."

Daphne was becoming more confused by the moment as Dumbledore fidgeted before coming out and saying, "That was a rather impassioned speech. Well delivered. I think you shall do your forefathers proud here."

Now Daphne was very much on the lookout and suspicious of this behavior, waiting for the other shoe to drop as it were. Harry must have been of the same mind as he replied in a guarded tone, "Thank you, Chief Warlock."

"I was curious what you meant by your symbolic use of 'The Flaming Sword of Justice'?"

Harry stared at the old man for a long moment before he slowly drawled, "The time for second chances is over, sir. The time for vanquishing is here. Those men and women that have been branded by their psychotic leader had to kill, rape or God knows what in order to be 'rewarded' in such a way. No more Stunning spells or Full Body-Binds. Bone Breakers and Cutting Curses are now de rigueur. I tell you this so that you may choose to keep your pet Death Eater under wraps."

Daphne almost laughed aloud. Harry was repeating almost word for word Remus' speech from their last lesson.

Dumbledore frowned at the statement. "My Lord, everyone is capable of redemption, even the most hardened criminal."

Harry nodded, "Very true. However, there is a balance between those that may be hurt, injured or killed and those doing the hurting, injuring or killing. I happen to fall in favor of the victim. Justice has been far too long in coming for Voldemort and his followers."

Dumbledore frowned. "I had hoped that you would be willing to show more mercy."

Harry stood stock still in his surprise. His face white, he took a deep breath to rant at the idealistic and somewhat delusional man standing in front of him. However, he was pulled up short by a sharp pinch on the inside of his arm. Daphne smiled sweetly at her husband, but the radiant smile melted off her face when she turned to the old man.

"Listen to me Albus Dumbledore," Daphne hissed at the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. "Don't you stand there and preach mercy when it's not in your lap to deal with the problem. You ignored Voldemort; let him come to his first rise. When he was a violent and alone twenty-something, you could have stepped on him like a bug and had done with it. Yet you sat back, bemoaning the state of Wizarding society. Bemoaning the inaction or improper action from the ministry."

Daphne took two steps closer to the old man, unintentionally putting herself between the two men. "It's your fault." Jabbing her finger at his throne-like Chief Warlock's chair she said, "You've had the power and the responsibility to move our society to a better place and you've shirked that responsibility. You've pointed fingers at graft or

the discord amongst the Fifteen in order to wash your hands of your responsibility, but I want you to know: It's your fault Harry's parents are dead. It's your fault Susan's parents are dead. It's your fault Neville's parents are effectively dead. You, by your inaction, allowed evil to flourish and thrive. So don't stand here talking about 'mercy' and 'forgiveness' when we've got to clean up the mess you made."

She turned and stalked off, wanting to growl at the crowd that had formed during her diatribe. A small caress on her arm told her that Harry was with her and she slowed down so he could draw even with her.

"You Ok?" he asked softly.

With a big sigh, she said, "He gets under my skin so easily."

Rubbing her back and shoulders, he guided her to the atrium so they could apparate home.

.oOo.

28 July 1996 Friday

Daphne was a little frustrated at breakfast. Today, Harry had only managed to hit her once in their fifteen minute dodging exercise. He had evaded her the entire time.

Susan and Neville had taken to copying the Potters style. At first, Daphne and Harry had adopted a static style, dodging left and right to avoid the curses. Feeling frisky one day, Harry had leapt at Daphne and somersaulted behind her. This opened the entirety of the Room of Pain for the exercise and opened up the encounter to all three dimensions.

Daphne was much better than Harry was at leaping, but surprisingly, Neville could actually jump the highest. Susan was as quick as a cat

but Harry was the most graceful. They all wondered how Shapeshifting might influence their movement.

"Why don't we add another person to the dodging exercise?" Susan asked. "You know, two people casting at the dodger."

Daphne thought for a minute and said, "Good idea." Glancing over at her husband and their friend, she got affirmative nods.

Hedwig swooped in, bearing a letter. She stopped at Daphne who removed the letter and said, "It's from Hermione." Reading the short note, she said, "She's inviting the four of us out to dinner. Her Mum and Dad want to meet us in a more friendly setting so we'll go to a place near their house where we can have 'good food and better company'."

Sitting back, Daphne sipped her tea and thought about the bushy haired witch. At the beginning of the summer, she hadn't thought too highly of Hermione Granger at all. Since then, she'd had about a half dozen opportunities to talk with the young woman out of a school environment and found she actually liked the girl. She could see that quite a few of Hermione's less desirable traits sprung from a deep seeded insecurity about herself. This helped Daphne understand more, even if she still loathed it when Hermione tried to lecture her.

.oOo.

The four friends apparated to Hermione's back yard, Harry and Daphne guiding Neville and Susan. They were dressed nicely, but more relaxed since their last visit. Hermione was waiting on the porch reading a book and bounded up to them.

"Great, you're right on time. Let's meet Mum and Dad and then we can walk to the restaurant. It's just a few blocks down the road.

Steven and Alice Granger came out of the house and Hermione

made the introductions. "My Lord, my Lady, may I introduce my parents to you, Steven and Alice Granger. Mum, Dad, the Earl of Longbottom and Viscountess Bones."

The Grangers were somewhat nonplussed, but refocused when Neville extended his hand, saying, "Pleased to meet you. Neville Longbottom."

"How do you do, I'm Susan Bones."

As they meandered their way to the restaurant, Daphne and Harry chatting with Alice, Daphne heard Steven say to Hermione, "Two Earls, a Countess and a Viscountess and we're taking them to Rigazzi's?"

Daphne could almost hear Hermione shrug, "It's Harry, Daphne, Neville and Susan, Dad. They're not all caught up in their titles, they're my friends. I just wanted you and Mum to be aware of exactly who they are and what they are as well."

Dinner was fun and the food was better. Daphne had laughed herself red when Hermione had told a story about a twelve-year-old Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom being caught by a less than pleased Deputy Headmistress when they accidentally entered her private quarters. She'd been in her dressing gown with a green mudpack on her face and given the two lads a dressing down for the ages. Later, the shaking second years had found Hermione in the Gryffindor Common Room and told all.

"Don't joke; it still frightens me when I think about it. I thought she was going to kill us," said a smiling Neville.

"We were early for detention and just wanted to get it over with." Harry said as he too laughed. Looking over at Neville they both burst into laughter, "It was pretty funny though."

They left the restaurant at eleven and wandered back, chatting and laughing. Abruptly, Harry stopped, sniffed and held up his hand for silence.

Daphne could smell it too, a sickly sour smell that wafted on the slight breeze like sickness. Neville too could obviously smell it as he muttered, "Death Eaters."

Harry looked around and then said, "Susan, aloft and scout ahead. They're probably between us and the Granger's house."

Susan nodded and in the blink of an eye was replaced with a Red-Tailed Hawk. A fluttering of wings and she ghosted away in the inky blackness of the sky.

"What? An animagus? But when? How?..." Hermione was in full investigative mode that Harry stopped right away.

"Later, it's not important now." He gulped and said, "Wands out."

"Harry, what do you know?"

Daphne answered Steven, "Nothing, but everything is wrong here."

Hackles rose on Daphne's neck and she heard a growl from Neville, low and throaty. "Hermione, it might be best to get your parents back to the restaurant."

"Can't you all apparate us home?" Hermione asked.

Harry's eyes were darting left and right, and then he nodded. "Ok, Steven, you're with me, Neville get Hermione and Daph, you get Alice."

"Now why would you want to leave our party before the first dance?" asked a voice from behind them.

Whirling about, Harry didn't hesitate and cast a full power Bone Exploding Hex. The spell sliced through Rudolphus LeStrange's shield and the Death Eater's ribcage detonated like a bomb. Daphne grabbed a shaking Alice Granger and tried to apparate away. "Damn! Anti-Apparition wards."

"Go! Back to the house!" Daphne had her wand up, a Ribbon Cutting curse on her lips. She'd been practicing it quite a bit the last few weeks and now could cast it multiple times without drain. With the tip of her wand glowing a phosphorescent red, Daphne and Harry led the party with Neville bringing up the rear.

A keee from overhead announced Susan's return and she alit before changing back to her human form. Panting a bit, she said, "An even half-dozen Death Eaters between here and the house with six more behind us."

Harry nodded and looked around. "Hermione, where's the nearest Police Station?"

"Four miles away on the other side of our house."

"Shit." He paused, "Guys, I'm open to suggestions."

Daphne watched Hermione thinking and then said, "I have an idea."

Fifteen seconds later, a Bengal Tiger and Grey Wolf left a shaken Hermione Granger and her parents with Susan and Neville. The Potters were going to attack using the darkness and their 'abilities' to either eliminate, reduce or distract the Death Eaters in front of them. Neville and Susan were to ensure the Grangers got inside their wards and then come help.

As soon as she'd transformed, she smelled them. Even heard four of them. She had agreed to follow Harry's lead on the hunt. Wish we



could communicate.

Her husband must have topped out at five hundred pounds or five fifty as a tiger where she was easily one hundred and fifty pounds, big for a wolf. Despite their size, they silently stalked their prey in this suburb of one of the world's great metropolises.

They found the first two Death Eaters standing side by side at the end of a large hedgerow a privacy minded homeowner had planted. The hedge screened the house from view, but also blotted out all light from the streetlamps making it nearly impossible for anyone to see. Anyone human that is.

Harry lined up to attack the slave of Voldemort on the left leaving Daphne the one on the right. Freezing in place and coiling her haunches for the leap, she waited. The night was silent, a television sounded from a few blocks over, but the lorries were all parked, the cars in their garages and the only other noise was a barking dog down the road. Must have picked up our scents.

With a snarl, Harry pounced. A heartbeat behind him, Daphne followed suit. She caught her prey in the back of his neck and with a twist and shake, ripped out the man's spine. The man fell to the ground, dead even before his knees buckled. She saw that Harry had literally crushed his prey. With an odd nod, odd for a wolf that is, she indicated that she was well and to proceed.

Moving a bit quicker, they jumped a fence or two and found a group of three waiting behind a parked van in a driveway. Slowing their approach, they put a bit of distance between each other so as not to be hit with the same spell.

"Oi! What the hell is...?" The Death Eater never finished his exclamation because Daphne had ripped his throat out. Next to her, the growling roar of her husband indicated the second man was down.

Looking up, she saw a hideously beautiful woman pointing a wand at her. With a giggle, the monster incanted, "Avada"

The chant was never finished as the woman's head rolled off her shoulders, bouncing twice before settling on the grass. Neville came around the side of the van, his wand up. Glancing down at the headless corpse of Bellatrix Lestrange, he spat on her expressionless face and then said, "You lot alright?"

The Potters transformed back to their human shapes. Harry said, "I'm fine." Glancing at Daphne, he got a nod of reassurance and said, "We got four plus Trixie here makes five. Susan where was the last one?"

"Near the house. It's somewhat hard to make the connections when you're directly overhead. But he was behind a tree in a big open yard near the Grangers."

Hermione said, "Was it an oak?"

"Yes, with a ring of white stones around the base."

Nodding, Hermione said, "It's our next door neighbor's house."

Harry glanced at Daphne and cocked an eyebrow. She nodded to him and he said, "Daphne and I are going to go on ahead. Give us thirty second and then follow. Don't dawdle; there are still six more that are probably coming up behind us."

The wolf and tiger loped through the yards, staying to the shadows as best they could. It was a feeling of excitement for Daphne. The hunt, the freedom of the night. Suddenly she scented the prey and before she could help herself, she sent up a howl. The call to the chase.

They could both hear the patter of footsteps behind them, and a second, larger set behind their friends. This second set spurred them even faster and now they were outright running. Springing over a low hedge, she immediately saw the target, but before she could move, Harry was on him, worrying him like a rag doll.

Spellfire. Behind them.

Harry dropped the bloody, broken corpse and shifted back to his human self. He followed Daphne, who was in full flight toward their friends. She ran down the sidewalk, not caring who saw. It was the fastest route. She came up on them, shifting on the fly and saw Neville and Susan attacking the Death Eaters while Hermione tried to shield her parents.

Two Death Eaters were down and bleeding and another two immediately fell to her Ribbon Cutter. A lance of spellfire cleared her shoulder and Harry missed with his hasty Piercing charm.

Running into the street, Harry caught the attention of the remaining two miscreants and smiled at them. Jabbing his wand out to the side, he smiled and casually invoked the Flame Whip. The two Death Eaters must have paled under their masks, but before they could move, Neville and Susan cut them down.

Catching her breath, Daphne saw that Harry was intact. Looking closer, she saw his expression was that of horror. Following his gaze, she saw Alice Granger trying to tend to a heavily bleeding Steven Granger. "No, no, no, no, no..." was all Alice could say as she hastily ripped her skirt for a makeshift bandage.

Running over to try to help, Daphne cursed herself for not learning more healing charms. Hermione stood in shock as her father bled on the concrete, pools of the viscous fluid forming at her feet.

"Move!" was accompanied by a shove from Neville. He much more

gently moved Alice out of the way and immediately cast "Suspensor Vitalis." After a long moment he called, "Harry! Need you here mate!"

Harry relieved Neville casting the spell that effectively forced a person to stay alive. Steven was in a bad way. His left arm was hanging on by a few muscles and he had a deep gash in his right leg. Fortunately, with all of his accidents as a child, his Grandmother had insisted that Neville take a summer course in basic and advanced First Aid.

The gash on Steven's leg was actually quite simple. A quick counter curse and it close right up. "Hermione, clean his leg," he barked.

Susan and Daphne had turned their backs on the group on the ground, looking out for more attackers. The call had roused Hermione out of her shock while Neville cast spell after spell on Steven's arm. The wound began to close, but...

"Hermione, we need to take your Dad to St. Mungo's. I might be able to reattach his arm, but I can't do the blood vessels or the nerves. I'm going to apparate him there now; you follow with your Mum." Glancing at Harry, Neville said, "Can you guys bring them?" Harry nodded and Neville and Steven disappeared.

.oOo.

By three in the morning, they knew that Steven was not only going to survive, but have use of his arm. How much was still to be determined, but the healers were optimistic.

At midnight, the red robed Aurors had arrived, a familiar face in charge.

"Wotcher, Harry," greeted a subdued Nymphadora Tonks.

"Hey, Tonks. Long time no see. How are you?"

"I'm alright. You still got both ass cheeks?"

Harry laughed a tired laugh at that. Remembering his manners, prodded by the elbow in his ribs, he said, "Sorry, my manners are slipping. Nymphadora Tonks, my wife Daphne. Daphne, meet Tonks. Only call her by her last name if you value your life."

"So what happened tonight? My newbie partner is questioning the Grangers, you two give me your story," and she took out a roll of parchment.

The Potters glanced at each other and Harry said, "Tonks, some things happened tonight that can never be written in a report. Nothing illegal, hell, Amelia Bones knows about it. But it can't get out at all and if it's in an after action report, it'll get out."

Tonks leaned back in her chair; the most serious Harry had ever seen the Metamorph. Setting down her quill, she said, "You two tell me the whole truth and then we'll figure out what to write down, eh?"

So they did. Daphne told the story with supplements from Harry. At the end, Tonks stared at the two before she burst out laughing. "This is rich." She leaned in with a conspirators' smile and whispered, "A bloody wolf and tiger? Really?"

Daphne smiled and nodded.

"Cor, that would be fucking cool." Shaking her head, Tonks rolled up the parchment and said, "I have no idea what I'm going to write up but that won't be in it."

She stood to gather her wayward partner and a look of hesitancy came over her. Finally, she said, "Harry, when you have some time, can we have a family talk?"

Baffled, Harry said, "Huh?"

Daphne smacked him on the back of the head and said, "Lord Black?"

"Oh, yeah. Are you free for lunch tomorrow?"

Tonks pulled her appointment calendar from her pocket and said, "Yep, what time?"

"Come over at one. We'll eat and talk."

A/N

1. I own nothing. Thanks to everyone who took the time to write a review, I appreciate it.

2. A big tip of the hat to peacethroughsuperiorfirepower and his fic Wicca Wizard. I have unabashedly stolen his Shapeshifting idea from him. Great fic, check it out.

## Chapter 8

29 July 1996 Saturday

Sunlight streamed through the large bay window in the Master Bedroom, waking Daphne. Fearing that sleep was lost to her, she rolled over to see Harry as he lay next to her, contorted like a pretzel. Covering her mouth, she almost laughed at the childlike innocence in his face. She could never have been able to tell that he'd killed five people the night before.

That was a troubling thought. Is this part of the Shapeshifting? A callousness? Disregard for human life? Do I really want to live like this? Her jovial mood buried under these considerations, she made her way to the lavatory for her morning routine. Casting the quick spell, Abluo Dentis, to clean her teeth and freshen her breath, she gave a cynical laugh. It's a bit late to be having second thoughts now, isn't it? She stared at her reflection in the mirror for a long time. But can I live with myself like this?

As she showered, her thoughts followed on. I killed in the Alley, how is this different? There was a long pause as she washed her long raven tresses. After washing the conditioner out of her hair, the thought occurred to her; Because on some level last night I enjoyed it. The hunt and the kill. God help me, I enjoyed it.

Crawling back into bed after drying off, she cast Abluo Dentis on Harry and gently shook him awake.

"Huh? Wozzat?" was his oh so lucent and intelligent query.

With a worried look on her face, she said, "Do you still love me?"

Stunned awake, he sat up in bed and held her hands in his. "I do, very much. What's brought this on?"

She gave him an exasperated look and said, "I killed last night."

Harry's was confused, "So did I and Neville and Susan for that matter. Do you still love me?"

Teary eyed, she said with some force, "Yes."

He used the pad of his thumb to wipe off the tear on her cheek, "What's in your beautiful head?"

She held herself back when all she wanted to do was throw herself in his arms and get the comfort she wanted and needed. In a whisper, she said, "I enjoyed killing those Death Eaters last night. The hunt, the chase and the kill. I enjoyed it all and wanted more."

Too afraid to see his expression, Daphne looked away in shame. His hand on her chin gently turned her face back to him and she saw the wondrous expression on his face. She'd only seen it a few times: when he first told her that he loved her, when they made love for the first time and when she'd accepted the marriage contract. "I love you so much; I can't even begin to tell you."

He paused and said, "I enjoyed it too. The rush, the satisfaction of them in my jaws or falling under my paws. My magic destroying them. It wasn't a sadistic feeling, where I felt powerful or happy that a person was dying. It was more as if I was satisfied that our enemies were being slain. Does that differentiation make sense?"

She nodded for it resonated with her powerfully; she only hoped that it was true. Now she could claim him to help comfort what had been lost. Growing up had been fast and furious for the last month and somewhere in her heart, she felt the last thread to her childhood snap.

Slowly moving to him she said, "I need you husband, make love to me and make us both whole."



.oOo.

The previous night's activity motivated the foursome's intensity in their exercises. The run had been a near sprint from the beginning and a few times, Neville had elbowed Harry out of his way only to have Harry shove back. By the end of the run, Neville and Harry were about to have done and start fighting right there.

Daphne hooked her arm in Harry's while Susan corralled Neville and the two couples went in opposite directions for a bit.

"Easy there tiger," Daphne said with a lifted eyebrow.

Harry's face was red and his nostrils dilated. Taking deep breaths, he looked at her with a scowl, which she returned with gusto. Softly, she said to him, "Bears and Tigers are solitary predators. They will seek to establish territorial dominance and drive out or kill competition."

Stopping short, Harry looked at his wife with a stunned expression. "That's exactly what I was feeling. A fierce and bitter jealousy. There was a gut deep need to beat him and make him submit." He hung his head in shame while Daphne rubbed his back. "I need to apologize to him."

Daphne nodded in concurrence. He looked at her and said, "Do you think I'll always be this way?"

"I don't know," she said with a frown. "We're not just human anymore. You're human and tiger. I'm human and wolf and so on for the others. I'd want to talk to McGonagall, but I think that since we're primarily or foremost human, then the beast's Ka will submit to our human nature." At least I hope so.

They met up on the path to the veranda and Harry walked directly over to Neville and stuck his hand out. "I'm sorry mate; I didn't mean

to be such a pillock."

Neville smiled his genuine sweet smile and took his friend's hand. "No problem, Harry. I'm sorry too. Bear and tiger don't want to play nice with each other, eh? Want to transform and settle it once and for all?"

Susan smacked her boyfriend on the shoulder and smiling, said, "I won't be having a seven hundred pound bear and a five hundred pound tiger wrecking Daphne's garden."

Daphne had a mock scowl on her face and pointed to the house, "Boys, if you won't behave, I'll be forced to confine you to the nursery."

Laughing, they made their way up to the veranda for lunch. Surprisingly, Amelia was not there. Usually, the Minister had breakfast with them before scuttling off to work. Harry picked up the paper that Dobby had left out and scowled.

"We in the paper?" asked Susan.

Harry nodded and sat back to read the article. When Daphne finished plating up her breakfast and sat down, he handed her the paper. "Hmm, good, no discussion of animals. 'Lords Potter and Longbottom, as well as, Ladies Potter and Bones defended themselves, their muggleborn friend and her muggle parents in a laudable fashion.'"

She frowned at the complimentary phrasing. "Who wrote this?" Looking at the byline she smirked, "Shanahan. He must want another interview." She got a faraway look in her eyes as she sat back in her chair, tapping her nails on her chin.

They ate in silence and shared the paper. Daphne had to give Neville a hard time as Puddlemere had thoroughly trounced the Tornados

980-100. He gave her the finger as he turned the page of the Business section, causing her to gasp in feigned shock. Susan leaned across the table and said, "Isn't he a beast?"

"I don't know, why don't you tell us?"

Susan was speechless and blushed to the roots of her hair, barely noticing the owl that landed next to her. After a few pecks, Susan noticed and retrieved the bird's burden.

"Auntie wants us to stay in for the next few days. Either here or Green Hills. Apparently their sources are telling them that the Death Eaters are less than pleased with us right now."

Neville snorted and muttered something that sounded like, "Genius, that."

Without looking up from the letter, Susan poked Neville in the ribs and continued, "The corpses of thirteen muggles were portkeyed into the atrium of the Ministry this morning."

"For the thirteen we killed last night."

.oOo.

During their Charms lesson, Flitwick paused and had them recount a brief summary of the skirmish the previous evening. As it wound down, he said, "Very well, what observations can be made here?"

His student became quiet and contemplative. After a long moment, he said, "Normally, it is unwise to divide your strength against a fairly unknown opponent. You knew that you were between two groups of opponents that each outnumbered you."

He turned to Daphne and in a matter of fact voice continued, "Had you or your husband been incapacitated or killed, your entire party

would have died. You were very fortunate. Fortunate indeed that you were so successful while stalking your enemy in your animal forms. I am not saying that you were wrong to act as you did. Conventional wisdom does not categorically state right or wrong, more like preference. I want you to make informed decisions. It sounds like you backed into a winning situation and that can't be relied upon."

He paused as he let this fact settle in. "When you rejoined your forces, you did very well." Pointing to Susan and Neville he said, "It sounds like you did an excellent job of combining offensive and defensive overlap."

Turning to the Potters, he said, "And when the heavy hitters arrived, they tipped the scales for you." His face became a bit merry when he said, "But you, Mr. Potter. Wasn't that a bit foolhardy striding into the middle of the street like that?"

Harry rubbed the back of his neck and blushed a little. "It got their attention on me and a little showmanship allowed Nev and Susan to easily get past their shields. I think it was an acceptable risk."

After a long moment evaluating the young man, Filius nodded and said, "I agree. I would have done the same, but I wanted to hear your reasoning. Well done all, fifty points each to all your houses," he finished with a little laugh.

"Let's get back to illusions, shall we?"

.oOo.

During Transfiguration, the students were tasked to rapidly conjure two foot tall golems and have them battle each other. With a bit of a smile, Daphne ensured all her golems were Slytherin green. With a barking laugh, Harry charmed his three Gryffindor scarlet, Neville his gold and Susan's were a flat black.

Surprisingly, it took quite a bit of concentration to control the three golems, and when McGonagall rapidly began to cast her Pinching hex, at first all that any of them could do was evade. Once Harry caught his rhythm, he smiled and leveled the Deputy Headmistress with a Stunner.

Daphne rolled her eyes as Neville's golem crushed her last avatar and said, "Nice, Harry. You get to wake her up."

There was quite a bit of glaring, a few pointed words, but the class continued with a new set of golems all around, and the melee continued.

As the other three exited the room for lunch, Daphne lingered and caught Minerva's eye. When they were alone, Daphne cast a quick privacy ward and then conjured a stiff backed wooden chair for her teacher, and a softer wingback chair for herself.

The Transfiguration Mistress quickly evaluated the conjurations and said, "Well done. You need to concentrate a bit more on some of the details" and she pointed to a blurry section of fabric on her chair, "but overall, well done. Now, what can I do for you?"

Daphne explained her feelings from the night before, how she had enjoyed the battle and then the almost-fight for dominance between the lads this morning.

Pursing her lips, McGonagall said, "These are some of the changes I referred to before the ritual. My understanding is in line with your hope: since you are foremost human, the beast's Ka will submit to your human nature.

"However," here she looked beadily at the young woman, "It won't be easy and will require a control of yourselves that your husband has not really shown. Deliberation and control will be needed in the coming weeks and possibly months, so that the beast within does not

take control even in human form."

Daphne nodded, concern flitting across her features. He has so much on his shoulders.

.oOo.

At a few minutes before one o'clock, a roar from the fireplace announced Tonks arrival. Dobby guided her to the family Dining Room.

"Grab a plate and join us Tonks. We're informal when it's just the family," Harry said as he indicated to the sideboard.

Daphne smiled at the now blue-haired Auror. Neville and Susan had gone to Green Hills to have lunch with Lady Augusta. Harry and Daphne had been able to have quite a few teatime discussions with Lady Augusta that had ranged from highly amusing to highly informative. Strangely, Neville and his Gran seemed to get along much better now. Maybe Lady Augusta wanted to feel needed.

Tonks availed herself of some food and sat next to Harry. She was awkwardly silent for a minute. Harry looked at her, then at Daphne (who rolled her eyes) and then said to Tonks, "Dig in."

Shaking her head and rolling her eyes again, Daphne said, "The sentiments expressed by my very hungry husband are the equivalent of 'The Blessing has already been said'."

Tonks barked her braying laugh and dug in. "My mum used to tell me stories about getting hexed out of her chair as a lass eating at the manor. One finger out of place and wham!" She shook her head and took a big bite of her sandwich.

There was silent consumption of the plain fare for a few minutes. Harry took a long draught of his water and leaned back, wiping his

face with a napkin. "Now, what can we do for you Tonks?"

Tonks slowly chewed, delaying her desired topic. Finally, she swallowed and said, "It's not for me so much as for my Mum." Waving her hand in an offhand way, she continued, "Well, it's for me too I guess. But, really for Mum. I guess."

Thoroughly confused, Harry looked to Daphne for a translation. Smiling at her adorably confused mate, Daphne rephrased her understanding in the form of a question. "Do you want Harry, as Lord Black, to do something for your mother?"

Tonks nervousness cleared and she smiled. "Yes. You see, when Mum married Dad, she was disowned by the head of the family as he is muggleborn. She says it's not a big deal and would do it all over again for Dad, but I can tell it does hurt her. She was born a Black, and even if she didn't buy into the pureblood supremacist crap, she's been proud to be a Black." Looking at Harry with a questioning expression, she asked, "You know?"

Softly, Daphne added, "And that would bring you back into the family as well, when Harry acknowledged you as a legitimate offspring of your mother."

The metamorph shrugged and waved that off. "Yeah, that's true, but no big deal for me. I have a family. It would be nice and all, but it's for Mum."

"I see nothing stopping us from reinstating her to the family." He looked at Daphne who shook her head in concurrence.

Tonks nodded in a definitive way as if to say, "I've said my piece." She finished her lunch amongst light discussion of life.

She was in the middle of telling a rather ribald joke when the fireplace roared and disgorged another traveler. Daphne checked the

clock and figured it must be Remus, just a few minutes early for the afternoon lesson. They had to wait for Susan and Neville anyway.

Harry was saying, "Give me a few days to figure out what the legalities of it all entail. We're going out of town tomorrow," he mumbled and ran his hand through his hair. "Let's have your Mum and Dad over for dinner on eighth?"

"Thanks, Harry. It means a lot."

Harry shrugged and half-smiled.

"Harry, Daphne, are you guys coming? Come on..." Remus started shouting from the hall, and finished as he came in the Dining Room. His voice trailed off as he saw Tonks sitting at the table. The older man and woman blushed, looked away and then locked gazes again.

Daphne pulled an interested face at Harry who raised his eyebrows in return. After a long moment, Remus looked to Harry, completely distracted from his original purpose.

Tonks stood, opened her mouth, shut it then opened it again. "So, Harry, does Remus know about your little secret?" Daphne almost laughed at her obvious grasping at a topic.

Remus frowned and said, "Secret?"

Daphne shrugged, so Harry stood from his end of the table, took a few steps away and then, with a smile Shifted into his tiger form.

"Cor..."

"Wha? A tiger?" Remus' confusion was slowly replaced with a wide smile. "Brilliant."

A cold nose bumped Tonks' hand she looked down and grinned.



"Remus."

The werewolf turned around to see a Grey Wolf looking at him with a curious expression. At this, the surviving Marauder broke into raucous laughter.

.oOo.

That evening, Harry pulled Dobby aside and gave him some instructions, causing a big grin and an extra big pop as he apparated away. Daphne beckoned her husband outside and they enjoyed the warm evening, meandering about the grounds.

"So are you going to explain yourself?"

"Huh?"

"The 'going out of town tomorrow' remark to Tonks today." She smiled and poked him in the ribs.

Smiling back, he squeezed her hand and said, "Oh, that. Well, I wanted it to be a surprise, but since Flitwick is going out of town to see his grandchildren, I thought we could go to the house in France. And, well, you know a little up and down the coast. We never did have a honeymoon."

Daphne looked at him quizzically and said, "More"

Laughing her husband replied, "Ok, I'll spill. I have us two nights in the Monte Carlo Casino in Monaco and another two nights in a house up on Lake Como. The portkeys are waiting for us in France. Dobby is packing for us right now."

She sighed and put her head on his shoulder. "You're the best."

The next week was full of fun, sun, sights and love. The house in

France was named le Maison de la Mer, or House of the Sea. It was not nearly as large as Rowan Hill, more on par with the summerhouse on Ullswater Lake.

They discovered that picnics on the beach include the ingestion of much more sand than expected, but were still fun. The weather was much hotter than at home, so they kept the house wide-open, taking advantage of the sea breeze mixed with Cooling charms.

Monaco was fabulous and Daphne expanded their wardrobe significantly. On the way home, she insisted they stop by Nice, 'for a spot of shopping.' Fifty thousand pounds later, they were both outfitted in the height of style.

Lake Como was easily the most beautiful place Daphne had ever been. The 'house' was actually a villa of which the veranda hung over the lake, making it the dock for the boat as well.

By Sunday, a tanned, rested and sated Potter family returned home to Rowan Hill. It was the end of their reprieve. Voldemort had been on the move.

.oOo.

07 August 1996 Monday

They arrived home late on Sunday, so their first contact with anyone was the next morning at workout.

Daphne was surprised at the lukewarm reception from Susan as the redhead entered the exercise room. The Potters had just come down and started their stretching when a somewhat stone-faced Lady Bones came in.

"Hey guys, glad to see you back."

Harry frowned and Daphne asked, "What happened?"

Susan continued her hamstring stretch and when she finished, exhaled loudly. Neville entered the room. As the Longbottom heir dropped his bag on the table, Susan explained.

"Voldemort's been on a rampage. Thirteen muggle corpses have been portkeyed to the Ministry Atrium every night since you left. There's been another attack on Diagon Alley, which is when they burned the apothecary. Hogsmeade got attacked and Scrivenshafts got Reducto'd a few times." She shook her head.

Neville picked up the story as Susan went to the bench press, "The Prophet has been going insane. No direct shots at the Ministry or Amelia, mind. Just a lot of wailing and gnashing of teeth."

Harry was working his legs, with Daphne spotting him. When he finished his turn, he wiped his face and spotted Daphne. "What's the Ministry doing?"

Susan went over to the table, turned on the wireless for some music, and replied, "What they can. Auntie appointed Connie Hammer to replace her as the Director of MLE and Scrimgeour will remain as Chief Auror. They are pushing everyone out in the field they can..." She faded off to indicate that though everyone was pushing hard, not much was being accomplished.

Daphne sat on Harry's feet as he did sit-ups with a weight on his chest. As she counted, she asked, "What's the Wizengamot done about getting Amelia the 'more' she was talking about?"

Neville and Susan exchanged glances and when Harry hit fifty, he stopped and looked at them for an answer.

"Not much."

"Fuck me." Harry muttered and shook his head. "Alright, after we work out today, I'm going to schedule a lunch meeting with the Minister for us. We need a laundry list of her needs that is reasonable for right now."

Daphne said, "You also need a money person on your team."

Neville and Susan both nodded. Susan said, "I know the process, but am not very smart on appropriations or taxes." Neville shook his head in agreement.

"Find us someone. On second thought. Daph, could you get a hold of Victoria Abbot and sound her out to see if Reginald would be willing to join us in our little power block? If he isn't appropriation savvy, he'll know who is."

Harry did another repetition of his sit-ups and then asked, "Has Dumbledore said anything in the paper?"

Susan had a disbelieving expression and said, "Actually, he's been in the paper every day. Soothing words, acknowledging the danger, but at the same time doing a fair job of keeping most people reassured that everything that can be done is being done. I'm actually very surprised considering his behavior toward you Harry."

Daphne frowned at the thought. Her frown deepened as she took it a step further. Finishing her own sit-ups, she said, "Ok, I really don't like the thoughts I'm having. Here goes: 'Just because Dumbledore was a criminal fuck stick toward Harry, doesn't mean he's necessarily dark'." She pulled a face and said, "What do you think?"

Harry was doing pull-ups while Neville did curls. Susan said, "I hate to admit it, I don't want to admit it, but I think you're right."

Daphne made a face and said, "Unfortunately, I think so too. Doesn't mean I want to have tea with him any time soon, though." She looked

to her husband and asked "Harry?"

Harry took a swig of water and exhaled. "I still hate him, but you're right. After the war is over, the parchment sitting in our vault is going to the DMLE and the Prophet. He is too useful right now to do otherwise." He wiped his face on a towel and said, "Amelia was right."

He tossed the towel in a hamper and said, "I'm going to go write a quick letter. Then, let's go run."

.oOo.

Between Charms and Transfiguration, Daphne used the Floo to call the Abbotts. An elf took the message and a moment later, Victoria apparated to the fireplace.

"Daphne! How are you dear? What a wonderful tan! What's the gossip?"

Daphne couldn't help but smile at the bubbly woman who had much more smarts than she let on. "We're just back from the Riviera and had a wonderful time. Now, to business. Harry, Neville and Susan are going to meet with the Minister at lunch to discuss resources now that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has really started raising a ruckus. Do you think Reginald might like to attend?"

Daphne had intentionally laid it all out artlessly as if the actions or Victoria's response was of no consequence. She could tell by the gleam in her budding friend's eye that Victoria saw right through the act, but appreciated it nonetheless.

"I believe he might be able to squeeze in a meeting. It's too bad Richard and Sarah MacMillan are in India on Holiday, they would be very much up for this. What time did you say?"

"One o'clock at the Minister's office."

"I'm sure he'll be there. Will you? If so, I'll come and we can run out for some food while they all chat."

"That would be lovely. One o'clock then?"

"Ta!" Victoria called out and Daphne ended the connection. She does make me laugh.

.oOo.

Her quick lunch with Victoria in a fashionable bistro off the Alley was very informative about not only the relations between the Fifteen, but also the other heavy hitters in the Wizengamot. Until a month ago, that would have included Lucius Malfoy, but unlucky Lucy was currently having some quality time with his favorite Dementors, Chuck and Larry. At least that's what Victoria laughingly said.

Arriving back at the Minister's office at two o'clock, she scooped up her husband and friends. Reginald Abbott had a broad smile on his face and shook Harry's hand thoroughly before they all went to their respective homes.

In the Entry Hall, she turned to Harry asking, "So?"

Harry led the way to the library where they were to meet Remus today. He smiled at her and said, "I think we can count on Reginald in this area. To say he's knowledgeable about appropriations and finances would be akin to saying that Neville's a bit furry in his other form."

Daphne smiled and exhaled. "So what happened?"

"Hammer had a list. Scrimgeour kept trying to nose in but Connie kept him on a short leash. I don't like him much."

Neville agreed, "He's a prick. Heard him at the last Ministry Yule Party. He was blotto and going off on pureblood this and that. He isn't an Eater, I think, just a racist snob."

"So Connie duplicated the list and we went over it. There was some back and forth based on cost versus benefit. There's some surplus in the tax income this year; tariffs have been providing a huge source of funds.

"Anyway, we came up a reasonable material listing for helping the Aurors. A lot of invisibility cloaks and dragon hide armor. Potion supplies galore and surprisingly a large purchase of Extendable Ears. Over five thousand Galleons worth. Connie saw her niece using one and thought it was the best thing since sliced bread and insisted they be added to the list."

Remus wasn't in the library, so they all took seats and Susan said, "The hard part is increasing the rules of engagement. Auntie does not want to use the Unforgivables, like Barty Crouch did last time and I agree with her. A person doesn't need the Killing curse to take down a Death Eater. A Cutter or Bone Crusher works just as well. What she wants is more immunity for the Aurors and DMLE officers when they kill suspects. Especially the marked ones.

"Their rationale, and Connie was especially passionate about this, is that if they are confident that they won't be prosecuted, they can really let loose to protect themselves. Ending the fight before it really gets going." Susan shook her head, "It's a slippery slope and hard to quantify."

Daphne pursed her lips. This was a full Wizengamot issue as the full body was the court. The Fifteen could ram through the law, but the Court could effectively ignore the law and convict an Auror who was merely following the law as written. She knew her husband would chalk it up as another failure of the Wizarding government in that no

one oversaw the courts because there were no checks and balances between the judicial, executive and legislative branches.

Susan saw her friend's expression and said, "Yeah, it means quite a few dinner parties over the next few months. Auntie said she's going to get some new dress robes for it all." They all chuckled at the thought of the severe and utilitarian Amelia Bones going dress robe shopping.

After a long moment, Neville asked the room, "Do you think we should invite Jones and Boot in? Make nice, olive branch and all?"

No one responded before Remus strode in saying, "Excellent, let's begin discussing demonic summoning rituals and the methods to safely interrupt or stop them, shall we?"

.oOo.

Since the Tonks family was coming over on Tuesday evening, Duncan Davis agreed to move up his lesson one day this week. He exited the Entry Hall fireplace exactly at eight o'clock, as was his custom.

Settling in the Drawing Room, he said, "Tonight, we shall begin Occlumency proper. You have progressed well in embracing your magic and can tap into it at will via the Magicus Intimus ritual. I applaud your assiduous efforts. They have paid off handsomely."

Harry smiled and said, "We have significant motivation."

With a wry smile, the old man responded, "Quite. Moving on, we shall begin Occlumency tonight. You know how to cast a Basic Shield spell incanted 'Protego'. There is also 'Contego', 'Aegis Fortis', and the very rare 'Arx' or Bunker shield. They all have something in common other than their effect. Go ahead and cast them."



Daphne stood and began cycling through the spells. She immediately discarded their appearance, as Protego was a translucent shield, Contego a shimmering silver shield, Aegis Fortis a metallic shield on the non-wand arm and Arx a shimmering bronze dome over the castor.

Closing her eyes and feeling the magic coursing through her body via the Magicus Intimus exercise, she immediately noticed that all the shields felt the same magically. Almost as if they had the same texture.

Opening her eyes, she saw Davis watching her expectantly. She smiled at him and he asked, "My Lady?"

Explaining her discovery, Harry closed his eyes and concentrated while casting the spells. After a moment, he opened his eyes and said, "Good one, Daph. I don't think I'd have caught that."

Retaking their seats, Davis continued, "What you will do for Occlumency is to cast a wordless, wandless, and most importantly, incantationless shield about your mind and thoughts. It is very difficult to do when one's mind is cluttered with the humdrum of day to day life, so the calmness and unity of thought that is a byproduct of the Magicus Intimus is a vital first step."

Seeing understanding in his pupils face, he said, "You know how a shield feels magically. Clear your minds and will a shield around your thoughts." He paused a long moment as they digested what he said. "Begin."

Daphne closed her eyes and straight away reached her calm center via Magicus Intimus. Metaphorically drawing a deep breath, she tried to will the Occlumency shield to life.

She gasped as it felt like she had thrown herself against a granite wall, immovable and impervious. Gathering her forces again, she put

forth her effort, this time to enter a magical free-fall. She could tell that she had missed the mark and was merely radiating magic out of her body. Pausing again, she stopped to think and plan.

Gathering her memory of the 'texture' of a shield, she threw her self into the memory with the intent of generating a shield about her thoughts. It was an old trick of hers in Transfiguration and hoped it would work here.

After a long minute, she felt a sputtering warmth around her thoughts, almost like a cocoon. It started and stopped, hesitating like an old car trying to run on only three cylinders with water in the fuel. She concentrated, trying to take control of the 'engine' and smooth it out, evening out the warm feeling. Immediately, the nascent shield vanished.

Frowning, she dove into the feeling of the shield as she had done before. The hesitating, sputtering shield sprang into life. This time she felt it around her thoughts and relaxed, diving more into feeling the texture of the shield. The sputtering passed and she could feel the soft thrum of her brand new Occlumency shield.

Excited, she opened her eyes and found both Harry and Davis watching her. "Did you get it too?" Harry asked.

With a big smile, she nodded to him.

"My Lady?" Davis asked, getting her attention.

"Yes?"

"Legilimens," he whispered.

Like a hammer on glass, she felt her shields shatter and scatter to the four winds. The magical impact rocked her back on her heels and she opened her eyes wide. Then the pain hit. Like a mental bruise,

her consciousness ached and throbbed.

She felt something pushed into her hand and saw that Davis had given her a pain relief potion. Giving him a slight nod of thanks, she downed the goop in one go and waited. A few minutes passed and the throb passed away leaving behind a faint tenderness of sorts. She was more upset with the pinprick to the balloon of her pride.

She looked to her husband, eyebrow cocked in the unasked question.

Harry just held up his own empty vial of pain relief potion to answer.

"I think that will be all for tonight. I must say, you two have taken to this discipline like fish to water. Continue to form and reform your shields as often as you can. At least three times a day. The more often you do so, the stronger they will become over time. I realize you have a strong motivation, but nonetheless, you have done quite well in a short period of time."

His words helped bolster her morale about her progress.

He stood, straightening his robes and then said his usual goodbye, "My Lord, my Lady," and after bowing, he left the room for the fireplace.

She sat on the couch, her head in her hands. Leaning back, the breeze from the open French doors rolled over her, the coolness caressing her heated brain. Feeling Harry sit next to her, she held out her hand and he took it.

"I thought I was doing so well," she complained.

He chuckled under his breath, stopping when she cracked an eye open and glared at him. Kissing her hand, he softly said, "Me too. Remember, though, he said we're doing really well. I didn't get within

hailing distance of this with five months of 'instruction' under Snape."

Daphne nodded and poured herself a glass of water. Occlumency was thirsty work.

.oOo.

08 August 1996 Tuesday

At Breakfast, Harry said, "Hey, look at this." He held up a letter from Hermione and said, "Her Dad came home from St. Mungo's yesterday and has over 90% utility of his arm."

Harry shook his head, "Sometimes I'm still amazed at Wizarding medicine. In a non-magical hospital, his arm would have been off minutes after he arrived. We take him to St. Mungo's and not only do they save his arm, but he keeps most of the use of it. Amazing."

Daphne smiled at her husband. His wonder at what magic could do refreshed her and brought a little bit of wonder into her own life. She couldn't thank him enough for that as it made life more exciting just waking up in the morning.

Tilting her head to one side, Daphne got an idea. "Love, what do you say we invite the Grangers to stay for the rest of the month? He'll need Wizarding care and they don't need to be worrying about feeding themselves and whatnot."

Harry's response was to kiss her soundly and say, "Thank you."

In Charms, they left the Room of Pain and went outside. With Harry's permission, Flitwick shaped a Dueling pit and also warded a mêlée area. The Charms Master first dueled Neville who made a very strong showing.

Neville limped out of the pit with a sprained ankle and fractured arm.

As a sign of their life over the last two months, no one commented. Susan just cast a bone knitting charm and gave him a dose of pain reliever.

Daphne went on the attack immediately, conjuring chain that she banished toward Filius, following it with three Bone Breaking hexes. Flitwick Vanished the chain and narrowly dodged the Bone Breakers. He spun out of the last one's path and had to drop under an overcharged Stunner.

Thinking she had him now that he was on the ground, Daphne relaxed for a second and tried to get fancy. She was halfway through the wand movement to conjure a granite bubble over him when Flitwick leapt to his feet and ripped off six Stunners in an arc.

Cursing her pride, she fell backwards to avoid his spells and found herself in the position she just had her opponent. Instinctively rolling, she had an idea to hopefully shock Flitwick and let her get her edge back.

Transforming to The Wolf, she leaped at the diminutive man. Her amber eyes narrowed in concentration when she saw the surprise on his face followed by a long hesitation. Shifting back mid-leap, she cast a Stunner that clipped his off-wand arm. Knowing his arm must be at least numb, she pressed the attack with stunners until he shielded.

Now she pounded, alternating Reductors and Piercing hexes. Flitwick's shield flared repeatedly until he winked at her and apparated away.

Shit, where'd he go? Spinning around, she saw a shimmer of a Disillusionment charm a moment too late and the ruby red of a Stunning spell was the last thing she saw before Morpheus claimed her.

She woke up with Flitwick standing over her, his hair scorched on the right side of his head. He smiled jovially at her and said, "Well done Mrs. Potter, well done. Excellent use of your wolf form. I was obviously taken aback by it."

Helping her up, he dusted off her back and in a moment of seriousness asked, "You do realize your mistake?"

Disappointed in herself, she nodded and hoped she hadn't disappointed Flitwick too much either. She'd really come to admire the man. "I got cocky."

Understanding, he nodded. "It happens to us all. Be grateful you are learning this lesson here," he waved to indicate Rowan Hill, "Rather than in a firefight with a Death Eater." He paused and then said, "What's the lesson, Mrs. Potter?"

"Don't hesitate and don't waste time. Take them down hard and fast."

He nodded and then said, "Miss Bones, I believe you have your turn now."

Susan did very well. She didn't screech and fly at the Charms professor, but did land a solid Bludgeoning hex that sent him flying back five feet. Unfortunately for her, it only seemed to annoy him for five seconds after landing her spell, he had her bound and suspended in the air.

"Well done, Miss Bones. You are the first to land a solid blow today," Flitwick said to a grumbling Susan. Harry walked up to Flitwick and handed him a vial with a red potion in it. "Pepper Up?" the Charms professor asked with a raised eyebrow. Downing it with one go, he said, "Feeling confident?"

Harry just smiled and shrugged, taking up his position in the dueling pit. All smiles and joking slipped away as they faced each other. After

a quick bow from each, they assumed their dueling stances; Harry in a low defensive stance, Flitwick in a wide offensive stance.

Silence pervaded. With a nonchalant flick of his wrist and wand, Flitwick began and a burst of Dragonfire roared down the pit. Harry disappeared right before the fire consumed him and appeared five feet to the right from where he had been.

Conjuring two dozen rubber balls, he banished them at Flitwick with a grunt, followed quickly by the Aquamenti charm. Flitwick dodged most of the balls, but one clipped him on the elbow, causing him to groan in pain. The water didn't hit him, but did soak his end of the pit.

Gathering his balance, Flitwick ripped off three Stunners and a Bone Breaker in his usual wide spread.

Harry smiled then did what the others had not and shielded the Stunner. Flitwick focused on him and began pounding with Reductors and Piercing charms. Harry only smiled broader.

With a quick apparate to his left, Harry reappeared and was casting at the same moment. The mound of rubber balls in the back became two lynx and then with a quick Freezing charm, all the water he had sent at Flitwick froze solid.

Filius laughed aloud. His boots immediately sprouted spikes for traction and he dove away from the feline attack. He shielded Harry's bone breaker while lying on his back, but the follow up Reductor and Piercing charms shattered the shield. With a smile of resignation, he fell unconscious as the stunner hit him.

"Yes!" Harry was jumping up and down, dancing about the pit. He ran over to Daphne and kissed her deeply.

"Hey there, handsome," she said with a sultry smile when he finished dipping her.

"I did it!"

"Yes, you did. Now courtesy says you should also revive him quickly."

"Oh, right," and he ran over to the fallen Charms master.

.oOo.

Harry had fired off a letter to their solicitors the day of their lunch with Tonks. The reply and associated paperwork and instructions were waiting when the Potters returned from the continent.

Harry was reading these instructions as he waited for Daphne to finish dressing for dinner. Tonight was not white tie, but definitely a dress robe occasion. She came down the stairs in a ravishing scarlet dress that had Harry glancing at the clock to see how much time they had before their guests arrived.

"I saw that," said Daphne. "And no, we don't have enough time."

Harry looked a little sheepish as she walked up to him. She ran her hands through his hair and said, "But later, you're mine."

He kissed her hand, just as the fireplace roared three times in quick succession disgorging the Tonks family.

Dobby led a tall, beefy, dark haired man into the room followed by a gorgeous blond with a striking resemblance to Narcissa Malfoy. Tonks ambled in behind them, looking decidedly uncomfortable in her dress.

The woman who could only be Andromeda paused and gave a deep curtsy, saying, "My Lord Black, thank you for inviting us to your home."



Harry blinked and Daphne hid a smile. He's so used to being addressed as Lord Potter; he must forget that he's Lord Black as well.

"Lady Black, we are honored to meet you," Andromeda continued.

Daphne gave a smile and gentle inclination of her head, acknowledging the greeting.

Harry then replied with real emotion, "You are most welcome. Family is always welcome at Rowan Hill."

At this, Andromeda's eyes teared up and Daphne was afraid the woman would break down. Obviously asserting the iron will the Blacks were so noted for, Andromeda rose from her curtsey and said, "Thank you, my Lord." Half turning, she said, "My husband, Theodore and you know our daughter Nymphadora."

Harry and Ted exchanged handshakes and Daphne said, "Please, come and sit."

They settled into the Drawing Room and Harry said, "To business first. Nymphadora," he smiled as Tonks hissed at him from her seat. "I said, Nymphadora, approached me about reinstating your line to the family. I talked to the solicitors and it's as simple as the Familia Restorum spell and a bit of paperwork."

Daphne noticed that Andromeda was cycling between red and pale while Harry talked. She got her husband's attention by gently stepping on his foot and widened her eyes at him. Harry looked confused, then the proverbial light bulb went off, and he asked, "Mrs. Tonks is there anything you want to say or ask?"

Andromeda opened her mouth to speak, paused and then said, "When my Uncle cast me from the family, he used the words 'I take away your right to be a Black as if you never were'. It may be an

impediment to my restoration to the family."

Daphne shook her head at Orion Black's cruelty but then stopped suddenly. A horrible thought pervaded her and chilled her spine. If she hadn't met Harry that night, her father would have most likely cast her out as well for disobedience.

Mentally shaking off the chill, she heard Harry say, "Despite the cruelty of your Uncle, I am now Lord Black. Do you want to be restored to the family?"

Andromeda mutely nodded, an expression of longing on her face.

Harry gave a slight smile, then drew his wand and said, "Familia Restorum." A bright gold light surrounded her and then branched off and surrounded Nymphadora and for a moment, the two women pulsed with the gold light before it faded away.

Tonks threw her arms around her mother and hugged her tight. Daphne could just hear Andromeda say, "Thank you Dora."

"Anytime, Mum."

.oOo.

09 August 1996 Wednesday

They bumped and bruised their way through classes that day. Giving them a break, Remus taught the four friends creature specific wards; wards against Vampires, certain common demons and, of course, werewolves.

Harry left after Defense class to fetch the Grangers and came back thirty minutes later with the three Grangers and a pocketful of shrunken luggage.

Alice and Steven were stunned at the wealth on display in the entrance hall. Hermione snickered and said, "Come on, when the weather's nice like this, we usually are on the veranda."

Eventually the non-magical couple meandered their way outside, stunned at the beauty on display at Rowan Hill. The Potters were chatting with Hermione about what her intentions were regarding post-Hogwarts aspirations.

"Well, I'd like to make a difference. Even if S.P.E.W. was ridiculous"

Harry mumbled "If?" to himself.

Hermione narrowed her eyes and pushed on, "If it was ridiculous, I still think that is the kind of thing I'd like to do. Try and help people the best I can."

Harry looked at Daphne and she knew what her husband was about to ask. She smiled and nodded, rising from her place to greet the elder Grangers.

"Hermione, I've got two offers for you. I need someone like you on my political team. You're sharp, catch things that others miss and can wade through fifteen pounds of books and find the one thing that's needed. I'd like to make you Lord Potter's Deputy Chief of Staff when you graduate. As you get more experienced with the ins and outs of the Wizengamot, you would become my Chief of Staff."

Hermione sat in her chair, biscuit halfway to her mouth and frozen into immobility.

Harry chuckled and continued, "Or you can be involved in the charity Daphne is setting up. We'll call it PB Charities or some such. You could be Daphne's Chief of Staff there. Whichever you prefer, we want you on our side."

Hermione shook her head and looked at her lap. When she looked back up, tears were dripping down her face, "You are such a good man Harry Potter and if you weren't married I'd kiss you within an inch of your life right now."

Harry laughed and said, "You don't have to answer now, but think it over. I'll also let it slip that you don't have to finish your courses at Hogwarts. We've done enough self-study in Charms, Transfiguration and Defense in the last month that we've already finished sixth year and half of seventh. Something else to think about."

Daphne had seated the Grangers in comfortable chairs and was moving back to her seat when she saw Harry stiffen in his chair. His hand flew to his forehead just as his scar split open and blood spurted from his forehead. Falling to the ground, his mouth was open in a soundless scream.

As if in a dream, Daphne pushed past the Grangers and reached Harry's side. She was vaguely aware of Hermione saying, "It's Voldemort." Grasping Harry's cheeks, she forcefully turned his face so that he was looking at her. Blood ran down his face and over her fingers. His eyes...

There was such anguish, pain and terror. Her heart was rent looking into such despair and with all her soul, she wished she could help him. Without warning, she found herself feeling Harry's feelings. The pain and screaming surrounded her. As she stared into his eyes, the feeling intensified and she willed him to feel her love and caring. She could feel his response and their love entwined, meshed and mixed. Powerfully, she felt Voldemort expelled from Harry's mind and her husband gave her a weak smile before passing out.

Daphne was breathing hard and her sweat was dripping onto Harry's face. Someone handed her a towel, which she used to clean Harry's face, and then turned it over to clean her own. Looking up, she saw a white-faced Granger family, Susan and Neville looking determined

and Dobby crying his eyes out over his 'Master Harry Potter Sir'.

"Dobby, please take Harry up to the Master Suite, I shall follow shortly."

Dobby nodded and with a mumbled, "Yes, Mistress," popped his master away to bed.

Susan helped Daphne to a chair and Hermione whispered, "What happened?"

Shaking her head to clear it, Daphne answered, "I'm not sure. I was heartbroken for feeling so helpless and then suddenly I could feel his feelings and a bit of his pain. I wanted him to know how much I loved him and it seemed to help a bit. I tried to reach out again and pushed harder with my feelings for him and it was as if we...meshed or intertwined." Daphne linked her fingers together in example.

"Anyway, when that happened, I could feel the invading presence be expelled. I can only assume it was Voldemort. That's when Harry passed out." She took a long draught of lemonade and said, "I need to go to him."

Looking to the Grangers, she said, "Dobby will show you to your rooms. I'm sorry we aren't more hospitable today, but..."

Steven and Alice waved off the apologies saying they could take care of themselves.

Daphne sat there, exhaustion sliding over her. Nodding to her guests, she stood, wobbled and was rescued by Susan and Neville. "Come on," Neville said and then apparated the two of them to the Master Suite. Susan apparated in right after.

"Do you need anything?" Susan asked.

"Could you please Floo call George Stebbins? He's our Healer and I'd like him to check us over. Right now, I'm going to sleep." Dobby popped in and undressed Harry as Daphne changed into a comfortable nightdress and flopped on the bed, asleep before she could even get under the covers.

.oOo.

Daphne woke early in the morning. The moon was shining in the window as it approached the full and she saw it was two AM. Sighing, she rolled over to check on Harry and found him watching her.

"Boo."

She jumped and he laughed at her. "You prat! You scared the life out of me!" After they both calmed down, she softly asked, "How are you?"

"I'm Ok. Apparently, George was here and checked up both over. He left a note," Harry handed the parchment to his wife. "Only thing wrong with us physically is being tired. Mentally, I feel pretty tenderized."

She nodded and rubbed his arm. After her scare yesterday, she needed to touch him to reassure herself that he was Ok.

"How are you, Daph?"

She shrugged, "I'm Ok. Not even really tired now." She went on to explain the events as she experienced them.

He nodded, as if she was confirming his experience and said, "There was just pain. It wasn't quite like when he possessed me in the Ministry, this was like sticking a piece of wire in my brain and wriggling it around. When he possessed me, that was...well, it was indescribably worse than the Cruciatus."

"How pleasant" she said in a horrified tone.

He snorted and pulled her close. "It's time to go hunting for him and his followers. The Ministry is hamstrung and he'll kill me if he can keep up what he did yesterday. When he finally left, I could tell it took a lot out of him to do that. I don't expect it every day, but my Occlumency lessons are now number one on my list of things to do a dozen times a day. Nonetheless, it's time to go hunting."

She nodded as her head rested on his chest. "We'll ask Hermione to research magical tracking. Hopefully, she'll find us something we can use and then start picking them apart, one at a time."

Harry nodded as he stroked her hair. "We've been reacting. The Ministry is trying but not getting anywhere." He threw his hands up in the air and said, "Maybe it's arrogant of me to think that we can do better, but I've got a feeling we can."

"Do we tell Amelia?"

Harry was quiet a long time in response to that question. Daphne went further, saying, "We should consider it. I know she said not to go off the reservation, but I think she realizes the situation we are in."

"Let me think on it. On second thought, let's ask Susan's opinion. I think Nev and Susan aren't going to be left out when we go on the offensive."

Chuckling herself, she said, "No, I don't think so either."

.oOo.

10 August 1996 Thursday

Neville and Susan were waiting for the Potters in the exercise room.

After a quick privacy charm, Harry and Daphne explained their intentions.

Without hesitation, Neville said, "I'm in."

Susan sat there staring off into space. Neville got a disbelieving expression and finally muttered in an undertone, "Sue?"

Shaking her head, Susan said, "Oh, I'm in. I was in when we talked mid-July. I was wondering about Auntie and the repercussions there." She fiddled with a five pound plate and then said, "I think we should tell her. She can feed us intelligence and in the end, she'd kill us if she found out after the fact that we were doing this."

Harry nodded and added a thought that just occurred to him, "And we can get backup quickly if we need it." Susan nodded and they went about their morning routine.

It was a much more somber group that walked into the family Dining Room for breakfast. The rain had been light enough to run but still forced the group inside. Amelia was the only person sitting and raised her eyebrows when Harry cast a privacy ward and sat next to her.

Tossing his reserve Auror badge on the table he said, "You may want to take that back by the time we're done talking."

"I don't like this conversation already."

Harry explained about the long distance Legilimancy attack from the day before and how the four friends had decided they were going to go on the offensive. 'Off the reservation' so to speak.

Amelia scowled into her tea and said, "I'd be knocking your heads in right now except for the fact that in the last two and a half weeks you've taken or killed more Death Eaters than the government has in



the last two and a half years."

She stood and started pacing. Daphne looked to Susan for an indication of her Aunts state of mind and got a big smile and a thumbs up in return.

Finally, Amelia stopped pacing, straightened and said, "Lord and Lady Potter, Lord Longbottom, Lady Bones, I hereby activate your Auror commissions and assign you to report directly to the office of the Minister for Magic.

"Your duties are to be non-specific and you shall only report to the Minister directly and in person. If that is not possible, continue to pursue any and all avenues to destabilize the organization known as the Death Eaters and, if you can, kill the terrorist who styles himself as Lord Voldemort. Do you have any questions?"

Daphne smiled and gave Amelia a grateful nod. She realized how far out on a limb the new Minister had gone for them.

"Don't fuck this up, Potter," the Minister growled at him.

"Thank you Amelia, I'll do my best."

.oOo.

Reading through correspondence at the breakfast table, Harry grunted and said, "Letter here from Dumbledore. He thanks us for the use of Black Manor, and he and all his compatriots have evacuated it with their belongings. Hmm, he's early by two days."

"He must want something," said Daphne without looking up. Victoria had written her a long letter that seemed to be relaying juicy gossip, but at the end had said: "Isn't it fun to play an airhead when really we're playing the game? Ta!"

Hermione came downstairs, followed shortly by her parents. Steven had a rough night, his shoulder and bicep paining him significantly. With a pale face and strained voice, he went back to bed after breakfast.

Daphne clucked her tongue as he went back upstairs and turned to Hermione and Alice, "Is there anything we can do?"

Alice shook her head sadly, "The healers told us he would have these episodes and the only thing that can be done is pain relievers which my stubborn husband won't take. He's unsure if they're addictive and won't take the chance. He knew a few men in the Navy who got addicted to painkillers after being wounded in the Falklands and he doesn't want to go through that."

After breakfast, Harry motioned Hermione to follow him and soon the five teens found themselves in the library with privacy wards up.

Hermione seemed a bit nervous and said, "Ok, why all the secrecy?"

Daphne let Harry take the lead and after a moment, he stated, "Hermione, we need your help." Harry then let Daphne explain what their intentions were, the backing of the government (which relieved Hermione greatly) and what they needed from her.

"We need you to be our idea person and researcher. In addition, I'd hope you wouldn't mind taking an interest in healing magic. We saw the other night how useful it could be."

Hermione sat there for a long moment, regarding Daphne seriously. Breaking off her gaze, she regarded each of the friends individually, ending with Harry. She softly asked, "Is this what you want, Harry?"

He steadfastly held her gaze and answered, "Yes. I really need you," using his hand to indicate the four friends, "we need you in this role."

Nodding her head, she said, "I'll do it. I'm not really cut out for the front lines, but if I can help in this way, I will."

A/N

1. I own nothing. Thanks to all those who have taken the time to review, I appreciate it.

2. Old-Crow has a new fic out, "An Inconvenient Truth" HP/SB and it's pretty good so far. Check it out.

3. So ends Act I and begins Act II. Fun and games, love and light are going to begin to take a back seat.

## Chapter 9

14 August 1996 Monday

The call of the wolf rose above the woods surrounding Rowan Hill, shortly joined by another. The second was rougher, more feral, yet the two wolves called out in their primitive duet as the full moon waxed over the woods and reflected off the relatively still waters of Cardigan Bay.

The high-pitched call of a large raptor intermingled with the howling of the wolves. Together, the three voices lifted up in a primal offering to the goddess of the moon. A prayer for good hunting. A call for their brotherhood. After a long minute, the three calls faded into silence. The woods were preternaturally silent, knowing the predators were on the prowl. Eventually, the first tree frog chirruped and the nighttime chorus resumed its eternal song.

A hare popped out of its burrow in a clearing of the woods, hoping that its movements were now safe. It glanced around seeing that the vines and underbrush that ringed the clearing gave the small one a measure of protection by screening it from predators. It hopped across the clearing to nibble at the tender shoots of a newly sprouted flower. The screaming roar that erupted as two huge figures tumbled through the underbrush, locked in battle, dashed the hope for safety. The hare scurried back into its burrow for the night deciding discretion was the better part of valor.

The two figures broke apart, circling each other, growling deep in their chests. The great cat had a small gash on its orange flank that it ignored. The werewolf reared up on its hind legs showing deep claw marks on its chest that matched the claws of the great cat in front of it. Taking a deep breath, the werewolf bellowed a roar at the tiger, which was not answered from the cat but rather from an ursine source on the edge of the clearing. The grizzly bear slowly entered the fray and bellowed its roar at the other two gladiators.

The three great predators surveyed each other in a triangle of sorts. Tension was thick in the clearing as they eyed each other. The tiger feinted at the werewolf and the bear made an aborted rush at the tiger.

A screeching hawk flew low over the clearing, gathering the attention of the inhabitants. Settling on a low hanging branch, the great raptor surveyed its domain imperiously.

All attention spun to the path exiting the clearing when a low rumbling growl reverberated around the bushes and undergrowth. Instinctively, the three male predators stepped back from the female wolf that faced them, ears laid back on her head, teeth bared and all her fur on end.

It didn't take the wisdom of the great elephants to see the ferocity and the death in the eyes of the she-wolf. Before anyone could move, the moon sank beneath the waves of the bay and the werewolf began his cursed metamorphosis. The predators watched with anguished eyes as the were-being cried out in pain as bones cracked and sinew reformed.

Remus Lupin crouched on all fours, panting in the aftermath of his forced change. The tiger padded up and nosed him in the neck. With a small chuckle, he patted the tiger on his huge head and said, "Thank you, Harry. Thank you all. This has been the best change I've had in years."

.oOo.

Daphne bandaged Harry's side and they ambled their way out of the kitchen holding hands. She treasured moments like this when they could just be teenagers in love. No insane Dark Lord, no governing bodies to work with, no nothing. Just Harry and Daphne in love and enjoying it.

She smiled at him as he paused to admire her. Daphne knew she was pretty and loved that Harry went out of his way to admire her looks. Knowing it was vain of her, she enjoyed it nonetheless.

Biting her lip, she pulled him close and forcefully kissed him. Her hands got under his robes and caressed him. He kissed down her neck and increased the tempo when he heard a moan.

Daphne pulled away, as it wasn't her moaning. With wide eyes, the Potters looked at each other and recognized the voice. They tried not to laugh as Susan called out Neville's name. Hand-in-hand, they ran down the hall to the main stairs and upstairs to their bedroom.

Once in the Master Suite, they collapsed on each other in laughter. Harry gave a short yelp when he twisted against his cut. Disrobing for bed, Daphne looked at Harry and with real warmth in her voice said, "I love you husband."

"I love you too, wife."

.oOo.

15 August 1996 Tuesday

Daphne sat in the visitors' gallery waiting for her husband and friends. They were currently outside the Wizengamot chambers and waiting for the Chief Warlock to call the session into order.

Per standard protocol, they had submitted their bills to all voting members and proxy members twenty-four hours prior to the session. It had taken Reginald Abbott, Hermione and Neville ten hard hours of writing and looking up verbiage to get the bills put together properly.

Susan had her bill crafted for the last two weeks, as well as, her request of the government. She and Amelia had a rather stiff

'discussion' in the dining room one evening and Daphne was surprised to see Susan put her foot down and assert her right as head of the family over her much older Aunt.

"I love you Auntie, but this is the right way to go. I feel it in my bones."

"Susie, you're going to attract so much negative attention from the Death Eaters. More than you have now." Death threats were a commonplace occurrence to the residents of Rowan Hill.

Susan fixed her Aunt with a steely glare that took the older woman back a proverbial few steps. "We're doing this Madam Bones."

Amelia sat there, unmoving for a long minute. She finally roused herself and walked to her niece whom she'd raised as her own daughter, loved as such and said, "I love you with all my heart Susie. However, don't you ever invoke Head of House with me again. I'm the Minister for Magic of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland and will not be forced into bowing to anyone's will, including your own."

It had been a tense Sunday afternoon. Later that evening, Susan and Amelia had taken a walk on the grounds and both came back red-eyed and smiling. All was well in the Ancient and Noble House of Bones.

Hermione was sitting next to Daphne in the gallery and leaned over to her asking, "Where's Harry, Neville and Susan?"

Daphne gave a little smile and said, "They are going to make an entrance."

Dumbledore rapped his antique gavel on the desk in front of his chair, calling for order. Most of the members had taken their seats when the fifteen foot tall doors to the chamber flew open, banging against the hinges.

The three youngest members of the Fifteen strode in abreast. Harry was flanked by Neville and Susan, all of them emanating an aura of power and authority. They stalked to their seats, Neville and Harry waiting until Susan sat.

In a move designed to make a point, Harry gave Dumbledore a quick nod once he settled into his throne-like chair. Old Deimos Thorne cackled at the move, which gave the impression that Harry was allowing the Chief Warlock to begin.

"Oh, my. The guard is changing," Daphne heard a person in the gallery mutter.

After the introductory greeting and the call for new business, Harry slowly stood and waited for the Chief Warlock to call upon him. Dumbledore couldn't call on any other member since one of the Fifteen had stood forth.

"My Lord Potter, you have the floor."

"Thank you, Chief Warlock. Our society is on the edge of a full fledged insurrection with rebellious forces that have allied themselves to the terrorist who styles himself as Lord Voldemort." He paused to let the bulk of the members to get their shivers and even yelps out of the way.

"We must arm our government so that they can execute a fundamental tenant for which our Ministry was founded in the first place: to defend our magical society from enemies, foreign and domestic. We have a domestic enemy of the state who has revealed himself in this very building. I'm sure you all have reviewed the bill that is put forth. Having gained counsel from my Lord Abbott on certain issues, my Lord Longbottom and I put forth a funding neutral increase for Auror equipment spending, an increase in the retirement age for Aurors and an increase in the size of the Auror force to be



paid over the next ten years by which the approaching storm may be beaten into submission."

Harry surveyed the room, mixing an intimidating and inviting expression the best he could. This should be a no-brainer vote and everyone present knew it. In Harry's mind, no one could oppose it and look like anything short of a Death Eater.

"I'd like to thank the members, proxy-members and my peers for their time." Harry sat with a flourish of his elaborate robes. Abbott had counseled politeness to the Wizengamot for the first few years. Harry was 'the new guy' despite his status and was only just sixteen. Good manners never hurt anyone.

After a long moment of silence, Triton Nott slowly stood from his seat. The old man wobbled and then steadied himself with his cane. The burly man raised his still firm voice saying, "This type of long term change to the structure of our Ministry must be studied. My Lord Potter's motive for putting forth this bill cannot be questioned." Here the man gave Harry a short bow and an oily smile before continuing, "However, I move this bill be remanded to the finance committee for evaluation of which a report be generated no later than six months from now."

Nott paused for second when a voice to his right shouted out, "I second the motion!"

The head of the Nott family nodded formally to the head of clan Lestrangle before turning to face the Chief Warlock expectantly. With a slight grimace behind his beard, Dumbledore stood so as to make the call for vote when a voice called out firm and strong, "Hold!"

Neville stood, broadchested and fierce of visage. "I call for this motion to be stricken." Turning to the other members of the Fifteen, he used the ancient forms of address saying, "Brothers and Sister, what say you to my call?"

"Potter says, aye."

"Jones says, aye."

"Longbottom says, aye."

"Black says, aye."

"Abbott says, aye."

"Bones says, aye."

"Boot says, aye."

"MacMillan says, aye."

Dumbledore continued to stand and stare, stunned into inaction by the unanimous vote of the Fifteen. As Neville retook his seat, it was obvious to all present that the Fifteen were taking up again their ancient role of stewards to ensure the survival of Wizarding Britain. Times were changing. There hadn't been a unanimous vote by the Fifteen in over one hundred years.

Shaken out of his torpor, Dumbledore asked the body, "Would any other member or proxy-member wish to raise other points of discussion?" No one spoke this time. After a full minute of waiting, during which there was some muttering in the ranks, Dumbledore called for the vote.

"My Lords and Lady. Members and proxy-members, the vote is as tallied: eight to zero for the Fifteen. The bill passes into law. For the common members, the vote is 215 to 34 reinforcing the vote for passage." Dumbledore took a sip of water and asked, "Is there any other discussion for the Wizengamot?"

Susan stood and was recognized. This was a much tougher sell to the more conservative members of the body, but she felt she could sway opinion enough so that it wouldn't appear that three teenagers were jamming this down their throat, even if they were.

"My Lords, members and proxy-members. The most pitiful sight in all of humanity is the sight of a child suffering. No sane person is unmoved by the image or story of a young lad or lass in pain. A youngster hungry or hurt is abomination. Many, if not most of the members of our august body have donated handsomely to worthy charities that fight this unfortunate situation in the hopes of eliminating this horrific state of affairs altogether."

She now smiled her most demure smile and said in a deprecating tone, "In an oversight, it seems that we have not put into place legal protection for those that suffer. It is currently legal for a monstrous person to whip a child bloody, torture them with pain curses and starve a child. This situation must be remedied immediately. We have no choice but to protect those who cannot protect themselves. Is this not our duty? Our duty to our country, our families and our children?"

She looked around with a pleading expression and said, "The bill submitted will protect the children of Wizarding Britain. Our future is ensured by this bill. I know you will all do the right thing."

Susan retook her seat hoping that no one wanted to paint himself or herself in the public eye as pro-child torture. Apparently, no one did as there was no rebuttal and for only the fifth time in Wizengamot history, a unanimous vote for not only the Fifteen, but also the common members was tallied.

Now Harry stood and faced the Ministry bench. "Madam Minister, I would ask the Ministry to investigate an issue and report back in no later than one month."

Amelia stood, knowing what this was about as they had discussed it

over dinner right when the Potters returned from the continent. "My Lord, the Ministry would gladly investigate an issue for you. What do you require?"

"I would know if the magical marking known as the 'Dark Mark' can be applied to an unwilling participant. Or to rephrase, must the participant be willing in the ceremony and application of the so-called 'Dark Mark'?"

Harry was merely requesting information from the government, so no rebuttal was allowed, much less discussion. If this were a bill, Harry knew the firestorm about the topic would be intense to say the least. This was the first step in destroying Voldemort, and it was a PR step.

Spiro Agnew, an outspoken member for pureblood superiority spoke up in indignation, "Chief Warlock, what is this twattle? Fifteen or no, this issue is a waste of time for the government and this august body."

Harry glared at the pudgy man with such intensity, Daphne shivered up in the visitor's gallery. Agnew couldn't hold Harry's gaze for more than a moment before looking away. To the man's credit, he stayed standing.

"Your comments are noted for the record, Member Agnew. You are aware, however, that I cannot block a request for information." Looking around the room with the gaze that made Grindlewald pause, Dumbledore asked, "Is there any other discussion for the Wizengamot?"

Slowly, Sir Robert Fitzgerald stood. He was an older man, in his mid seventies, but still very spry and very outspoken. After being recognized, he took a moment to survey the chamber. He spoke in a measured tone, enunciating clearly and conveying emotion and intent quite clearly.

"Chief Warlock and distinguished Members of this august body. I am a traditionalist. I believe that many if not most of our traditions have a valid place in our day to day life and should be upheld, if not treasured."

He paused, an expression of sadness and regret playing across his features. The expression of a disappointed parent. "I find myself wondering about tradition today, though." With a surprising vehemence, he stabbed his finger at Harry saying, "Our newest members make me call our beloved traditions into question. The fate and direction of our much-loved country falls into the hands of two wizards and a witch not even seventeen."

Shaking his head in bewilderment, he continued, "The Fifteen have always been a part of our body and have rarely used their extraordinary power to force the rest of us," here he slowly turned to face the rest of the body, "to submit to their whims." Shaking his head again, he concluded, "I am a traditionalist, but I wonder about where we are headed."

Daphne was shocked that Sir Robert sat to a moderate amount of applause. However, before he had even re-arranged his maroon robes, Lord Jones had bolted from his chair and was recognized by the Chief Warlock.

Jones was almost hissing with rage, "Sir Robert is a fine man, an excellent Member but has forgotten a fundamental tenant of our body."

Turning to face the older man, Lord Jones pulled himself up to his full height and said, "Over one thousand years ago, in the aftermath of the fall of Camelot, Wizarding Britain was constantly at war. The slaughter was tremendous and even spilled into the muggle kingdom in the wars of succession between King Stephen and the Empress Maude. The founding of Hogwarts was an attempt to bring the warring families and clans to a peaceful co-existence but even that

failed due to the ideological differences between Gryffindor and Slytherin.

"The fifteen most prominent families and their vassals banded together their magics and forced all the warring factions to come to the table of peace and agree to subjugate all of Britain to the rule of this body. Our familial magic allows this body to govern. Without the original Fifteen families, there would have been no Wizengamot. The formation and continuance of the Fifteen is no mere tradition as was implied by Sir Robert. The Fifteen is necessary for our body to continue to legally function and is required by right of magic."

Jabbing his finger at Fitzgerald, he spat, "In fact, Sir Robert, your family was dragged to the table of peace screaming and kicking, so do not defame the walls of this chamber with seditious words under the guise of humility. Our newest members lack experience this is true. However, they are the heirs of Charlus Potter, Tiberius Longbottom and Nathaniel Bones. Giants among men who strode into this chamber when they were not much older than our current representatives."

Scowling at the room as he sat, Jones concluded, "I recommend any member consider what I have said before they speak."

Daphne sat in the visitor's gallery, stunned. Next to her, Lady Augusta leapt to her feet, applauding vigorously, while many others in the chamber and the gallery followed her lead. Shaking her head, Daphne thought, Jones is going to want something for that performance.

Looking over to the press box, Daphne saw four reporters scribbling furiously. Like blood in the water for them. The new debate is going to be the need and or legitimacy of the Fifteen.

.oOo.

16 August 1996 Wednesday

The Prophet did swarm to the story.

IS FIFTEEN OUTDATED? Was followed by POTTER, L-BOTTOM  
AND BONES MAKE NEW LAWS.

Daphne sat back in her chair on the veranda. Their workout had been very intense this morning and the dodging exercise had become a full out melee where all four attacked one another at will. The melee ring got quite a workout.

Susan had been so graceful, dodging hexes as if she were floating - or flying - while Neville had quickly darting to avoid the stinging hexes. Harry had been a blend of power and motion while Daphne had been a blur of movement

At the end of the exercise, Harry looked down at himself and scowled, "Got killed twelve times," and dispelled the minor hexes.

His statement had brought the other three back to their purpose for the exercise. This wasn't a game.

Reading the story, she saw that the paper was actually reporting both sides. There was an entire story devoted to the history of the Wizengamot and why the Fifteen had the power they held.

Shaking her head at the expected firestorm of letters to the editor, she turned the page and her heart stopped.

GREENGRASS      MANOR      BURNED,      DEATH      EATERS  
RESPONSIBLE

Her involuntary cry had Harry at her side. He read over her shoulder while she tried to comprehend what she was reading.

Her father had been killed.

Her mother and siblings were in the hospital.

She barely registered Harry's arms encircling her nor that Susan and Amelia's murmured words. Numb. Her entire being was numb and she felt like her consciousness was floating about the room. There was no thought, no feeling, just disconnectedness from life.

"Daph?"

Jerked back into her body, she heard and felt again as if someone flipped a switch. Hesitantly looking at the sources of the voice, she saw Harry watching her with aching eyes.

"Let's get dressed and go see your Mum, Stori and Phillip."

Twenty minutes later Harry led her down a hallway at St. Mungo's forging a path through the crowd. More than a few Healers and Sisters stopped and stared at the stalking Lord Potter. Most just got out of his way.

After getting directions to their room, Harry led her to the lift and up to the fourth floor. Pushing through more crowds, Daphne had a transient thought about changing to The Wolf to clear the way. The brief smile was her first since she'd read the paper earlier.

Following Harry, she went into a room and found her mother and brother asleep while Astoria stared out a window.

"Stori?" she whispered.

Daphne's younger sister had a bandage wrapped around her left arm from her wrist to elbow and a smaller one on her right forearm. She slowly turned her head toward her sister and just stared at her.



"Stori, can you hear me?" Daphne asked with a tremulous voice.

Astoria's eyes teared up and she croaked, "Oh Daphne."

Daphne rushed to her sister, wanting to envelop her and hold her close. Just as she reached for her, Daphne stopped and asked, "Are you hurt badly?"

"Burns," was the only response.

Daphne leaned over and kissed her sister on the forehead. "Mum? Phillip?"

"Mum got hit with a curse they can't identify. Phillip just got beat up." Astoria paused and a tear trickled down her face. "He tried to defend us after they killed Father."

Daphne could feel Harry's hands on her shoulders; a comforting presence. "Did Father suffer?"

Astoria looked away and nodded. Daphne could only close her eyes and let out a sigh. She had hated her father, but in the end, he was still her father. There wouldn't be much grief, but she was worried about the impact of his murder on the rest of the family.

"Entrail expelling curse after the Cruciatus," Astoria mumbled.

Daphne dropped her face into her hands while Harry hugged her from behind. "Did Phillip see it?"

Astoria looked over at her younger brother and whispered, "Yes."

"Gods..." Daphne moaned. Harry held her tighter and she leaned into the embrace. She felt stronger in his arms, yet the pain was just as acute. "Poor Phillip."

Remembering her sister, she reached out and took her hand asking, "How are you doing with it, Stori?"

Astoria lay there, looking at Phillip and Daphne noticed a tear trickling down her sister's face. After a full minute of silence, she breathed, "I'm a horrible person."

Shocked by the seeming non-sequitor, Daphne quickly said, "No you're not. Why would you say such a thing?"

Quiet reigned again. Daphne slowly stroked her sister's hand while Harry held his wife. Astoria finally croaked, "I'm glad he's dead." She burst into tears and this time, Daphne leaned over and gently took her sister in her arms.

While the younger girl was crying, Astoria almost shouted, "He hurt you so many times and he was so mean. He only hurt me a few times but I knew he would do more. And the women! I caught him with three other women. I used to wish he would die and leave us alone, and now he's gone and I feel like it's my fault."

At the end of her rant, the girl was nearly hysterical and Daphne soothed her as best she could, cooing to her and stroking her hair.

Harry spoke up for the first time and very gently stated, "It's not your fault, Astoria. It's Voldemort's fault. He wanted to hurt Daphne and me so he targeted you. Blame him, not yourself."

Astoria nodded into her sister's shoulder as her sobs trickled away to tears. Hesitantly, Harry reached out and squeezed her undamaged hand before letting go.

.oOo.

Astoria had been given a pain relief potion that had knocked her out until mid-afternoon, so Harry and Daphne went home for a bit. They

arrived at Rowan Hill half way through the charms lesson. Flitwick had been genuinely concerned about Daphne's family and listened to the tale of what they knew happened. He shook his head sadly.

"So much evil from one twisted man," he said in an undertone.

Classes were quiet that day, as the students buckled down and did their work. Since Hermione was staying at the house, she too joined in the lessons.

At lunch, Hermione said, "I had no idea you were covering so much material so fast. We covered at least two weeks of a normal course in two double lessons today."

Daphne nodded around her sandwich. Swallowing, she said, "I've actually come to enjoy this much better. The four of us all are highly motivated and pick up the spells quickly. Harry doesn't have to worry about essays," she laughed as her husband threw his napkin at her, "and we just work on the basic theory but focus on the execution."

"But what about when we go back to school?"

Uncomfortable, Daphne looked to Harry who said, "Daphne and I are not going back to school."

Hermione took a deep breath to begin a rant of epic proportions but paused. A contemplative look came over her and she looked down at the table. Everyone was quiet and Alice reached over and rubbed her daughter's back, a knowing look on her face.

Daphne wasn't surprised to see tears on Hermione's face when she looked up. Wiping her cheeks, she snuffled, "I'll miss you."

Harry looked down at his plate, "You understand?"

She nodded and said, "You're doing good work in the Wizengamot

and doing your studies on a self-paced schedule. On top of it is your antagonism with the Headmaster and Professor Snape. I don't like it, but I understand."

Daphne caught Harry's eye and indicated toward Hermione with her head. His confusion cleared after a moment, so he got up and approached his long time bushy haired friend. Tentatively, he embraced her. She pulled him close, crushing him to her.

"I'll miss you too."

.oOo.

Remus had the students in the Room of Pain when the door burst open and Tonks ran in the room. Doing a quick scan of the room, she found Harry and made a beeline for him. Daphne smiled as Harry's eyes widened in apprehension and he took a step back.

Waving a piece of parchment, Tonks yelled, "Dammit Harry, what the hell is this?"

"Er, a piece of parchment?"

Remus snorted and laughed into his hand while Daphne smiled. She realized what was going on and decided to support her mostly clueless, but cute, husband.

The upset metamorph shoved the parchment into Harry's hands and after he read it, he said, "Oh, this. Well, consider it a 'Welcome back to the Family' gift."

"A clock is a 'welcome to the family' gift. A potted plant is a 'welcome to the family' gift. A fifty thousand galleon dowry is not a 'welcome to the family' gift."

"Is your Mum complaining?"

Confused, Tonks asked, "Mum? What does she have to do with it?"

"She got the same thing, but since she and your Dad are already married, it went directly into their vault, not held in trust."

Tonks stared at Harry for a long minute and then giggled a bit. The giggles became belly laughter and she choked out, "Mum is going to go insane when she finds out. At the same time, she's a bit too proper to complain about it. Man, it's going to put her knickers in a twist."

Jumping to her feet, she tripped and fell backward into Remus' arms. They both were blushing bright red when she finally said, "I'm going to go to Mum's and tell her. I want to see her face. I bet she turns red before she can even say a word. See you later."

Remus called out for her and Tonks turned back, a hopeful expression on her face. Remus approached her and the students all stilled to eavesdrop on the conversation.

"I, er, was wondering if you were busy tomorrow?" the werewolf asked.

Tonks eyes opened widely and brightened, "Nope, I've got the whole day off and am not on call."

"Well, uhm, we're going to do some melee training and I was wondering if you would be available to help?"

The hopeful expression slid off Tonks face and was replaced with visible dejection. "Sure, I'll be here. What time?"

"Two o'clock?"

"I'll be here." She slowly turned to head to the Entry Hall.

After a long moment of obvious indecision on Remus' part, Harry called out, "Are you a Gryffindor or what?" to his parent's surviving friend.

Abashedly, Remus nodded and ran after her saying, "Hey Tonks!"

The four friends immediately shifted forms, as their hearing was superior in their animal shape. Hermione muttered, "Not fair."

Daphne heard Remus catch up to the object of his affections and ask, "After the melee, if we aren't too beat up, would you like to get an early dinner?"

"Is this a date, Remus?"

Daphne could hear Remus running his hand through his hair before he said, "Yes, I do believe it is."

After the sound of a chaste kiss, Tonks said, "I'd like that very much, Remus." In a much more chipper tone, she called out; "See you tomorrow," as she moved away.

The four animals all looked at each other, what passed for smiles on their bestial faces. As Remus' footsteps got louder, Daphne suddenly remembered to change back. The Lycan walked in to four students changing shape back to human and Hermione standing there with a red face.

Glaring at the five teens, he asked, "Are you done?"

With a cheeky smile, Harry replied, "Oh no, we're just getting started."

Daphne linked her arm in her husband's and asked, "Are you done?"

Sighing, he said, "Let's get back to wide area affect curses."

Daphne smiled a bit broader and needled, "But you didn't tell me if you're done yet or not?"

His only response was a half-hearted glare.

.oOo.

The Potters returned to St. Mungo's after Defense lessons. Evelyn and Astoria were still asleep, but Phillip was awake. Daphne engulfed him in a hug, which he returned tenderly.

"How are you?" she asked.

He shrugged and said, "Sore."

Daphne was confused. Usually Phillip was gregarious and a motormouth. His reticence was very unusual, but after what happened, Daphne was ready to make allowances.

She patted his arm and they discussed his injuries. "You'll come home with us until Mother is well enough to come home. Ok?"

He just nodded and fiddled with his sheet.

Harry placed his hand on her shoulder, "Daph, why don't you go check on Stori and your Mum."

As she moved to the other side of the room, she heard Harry sit down and say, "I'm sorry you lost your Dad." There was no audible response, so she could only assume he shrugged or the like.

"Let me tell you what happened at the end of my fourth year." He then went on to explain how Voldemort returned and Cedric was killed. Not all the gruesome details, but enough to convey his point.

"I spent the bulk of the next summer blaming myself for Voldemort's return and Cedric's death."

Daphne glanced over to see Phillip's attention riveted on her husband. Harry leaned into the boy on the bed and said, "I was wrong. Daphne pounded into me this summer that I'm only responsible for what I do and even then there are always circumstances that force me into certain things."

Phillip looked at his new hero and said, "I wanted to protect my Mum and Stori and couldn't. I'm worthless."

Daphne stifled a cry while Harry calmly shook his head calmly. "No. Look at it from another person's perspective. How can one young man with no real magical training stand up to...how many?"

"Four"

"Right, four fully trained witches and wizards who practice the most horrific kind of magic? To think you could have successfully defended them isn't really honest. The best you could have done is run away. I know how you feel. Like you should have done something more to protect your family. You did all you could and then some."

Phillip had a new expression replacing the recrimination of not only five minutes before; contemplation.

They stayed through dinner, chatting with Phillip about Quidditch (he was a Puddlemere fan like Daphne). Harry regaled the two with stories about Oliver Wood, the new starting Keeper for United. At the end, Daphne was laughing, Phillip wide eyed, and muttering, "Wow, you know Oliver Wood."

Susan and Neville stopped by after dinner and stayed a while. Astoria was a budding herbologist so she and Neville chatted



enthusiastically about various cuttings, clippings, and whatnot. Susan rolled her eyes and joined the discussion with the now awake Evelyn.

Apparently, she had been hit with a dark version of the stunning spell that knocked out the victim and inflicted terrifying nightmares on them. When she awoke, Daphne was concerned about her reaction to the loss of her husband. She squeezed Daphne's arm and said, "Don't worry about me, blue eyes. You know how I felt about him."

At nine o'clock, the Sister booted them from the hospital. Astoria and Phillip would be released the next day, but Evelyn's situation was being evaluated day-to-day.

When they had all apparated to the Entry Hall of Rowan Hill, Harry stopped everyone. He had a cold look of contemplation and said to the others, "I think I'm going to change and spend a bit of time in Knockturn Alley tonight. Anyone want to come with?"

The faces of the other three hardened and nodded as one. "Be back here in ten minutes."

.oOo.

17 August 1996 Thursday

It was one AM and Daphne stood opposite Harry in the darkness of Knockturn alley, Neville to her left. Susan was aloft while the other three waited, disillusioned. This coming out and waiting is fairly useless. We need intelligence on where they are. We've become fairly dangerous and deadly, but need the location of the bad guys so we can go there and be dangerous and deadly.

From above, the call of a hawk caught their collective attention and far to her right, Daphne saw a group of four moving their way. They moved down one side of the alley, trying to stay in the shadows, but

not putting much effort into the task.

A ruffle of feathers told her that Susan had landed and taken up her position, per the plan. They had agreed to use non-lethal incapacitation unless they were positive the subject was a Death Eater. None of them could envision anyone in Knockturn Alley after midnight not being a Death Eater, but Neville had been insistent.

The foursome stepped out from the shadows and the moonlight illuminated their eerily white masks.

Death Eaters. Solves that problem.

The four friends were in a loose box formation, no one directly across from the other. Each was next to something recognizable so the other three would know where they were located. Daphne was next to a large stuffed bear in front of a dubious apothecary shop.

Harry was to cast first and that would signal the others. The Death Eaters ghosted down the alley on the opposite side and moved past Harry's location underneath the sign for The Speckled Basilisk. Two heartbeats later, Harry's Bone Breaking hex lanced out, impacting one of the Death Eaters in the head, cleaving the man's skull like an ax would have.

The man dropped like the sack of shit he was, but before the other three could move, Daphne cast a silent Reductor curse, catching her target in the chest, turning his torso into so much jelly.

Looking around, she saw one of the Death Eaters fall to the ground, headless and the last had a hole through his chest the size of her fist. She canceled her disillusionment charm and approached the bodies.

Harry was already there and looked up. "They're dead. Use the egress route we discussed."

The other three didn't even blink, just apparated away. Daphne apparated first to the front gates of the monastery in Shrewsbury and then back to London and Trafalgar Square. A quick hop to the front steps of the British Museum and then home. She was the first one in the Entry hall.

"Dobby."

The small elf popped in with a serious expression. "Mistress is well? And Master Harry?"

"Yes Dobby, we are both well and Harry shall be along shortly. Please draw a nice hot bath." Dobby bowed low and popped away as the other three arrived in quick succession.

Daphne burrowed into Harry's arms for a long minute. "Come on, Dobby's drawing us a bath."

As they left for the Master Suite, Daphne heard Susan whisper to Neville, "Will you please stay tonight?"

Daphne didn't hear the response, but recognized that none of them should be alone this evening.

.oOo.

The next morning, after workout, the Potters, Susan and Neville entered the family dining room. Amelia sat at the table, finishing her breakfast. After everyone sat and dug in, Amelia tossed the paper at Harry and gave him a long look.

The headline shouted **FOUR DEATH EATERS FOUND DEAD IN KNOCKTURN ALLEY.**

Harry raised his eyebrow in mock surprise before passing the paper to Daphne. "Unfortunate for them."

"Yes, it is," replied Amelia without looking up.

Daphne read the article and found only the names of the dead. Two Carrows, a Yaxley and a German by the name of Bismarck. There were no leads, but most persons interviewed in an official capacity or otherwise, didn't seem too chuffed to run it down.

Handing Neville the front page, Daphne pulled out the sports section. Puddlemere had started a match on Sunday and it was still going. Both Seekers had been hospitalized twice during the match, prolonging the agony. Three times, the teams had voluntarily stopped playing and slept on conjured beds while the reserves ensured no play occurred. She was hoping the match would finally end as Puddlemere was up by 1000 points. It would be the highest point total in Quidditch League history.

As she rummaged to the scoreboard, she could feel Amelia's gaze on them all. Finally, the Minister sighed and headed out the door after kissing her niece on her head. When the soft crack was heard from the Entry Hall, Susan asked Neville, "Do they have any leads?"

"No, and it looks like they aren't too keen on getting any."

Hermione came in the room and sat down next to Susan after plating up her breakfast. She looked over the table to Neville and read the headline upside down. Frowning, she looked at all gathered and stated, "You all did that last night."

Harry paused, set down his tea and asked, "Why would you say that?"

"Please, Harry. You decide to go on the offensive the other day. Then, Daphne's family is attacked followed by four dead Death Eaters in Knockturn. I'm not stupid. Especially since one went down by a Bone Breaker" looking at Harry, "and another by a Cutter to the neck," and

she looked at Neville.

Neville frowned and looked at the paper. "It doesn't say either of those two things here."

"No, but those are your two favorite curses. You shouldn't fall into a pattern or the Aurors will be forced to try and track you down even if they don't want to." She paused and then said, "Look, I know Amelia sanctioned anything you all do to fight Voldemort, but it sure looks like vigilantism."

Looking at Daphne, Hermione asked, "Ribbon Cutter?"

Daphne smiled. She'd already considered the issues and responded, "Nope. Reductor to the chest."

Without prompting, Susan said, "Piercing charm."

"At least the girls think things through," Hermione opined before reading the front page and finishing her meal.

.oOo.

Neither Flitwick nor McGonagall commented on the deaths from the previous night, just worked their charges as if today was their last day they could possibly learn. Daphne was thriving in the accelerated environment and was pleased to see Harry doing well also.

"Part of it is the motivation," he laughed in response to her question, "the other part is the attitude. We aren't learning ridiculous charms that don't have any real value other than as a stepping-stone. We're learning real magic that we can use on a real time basis. The usefulness of each lesson is evident even to me."

At lunch, the Potters slipped out to the hospital and found Astoria and Phillip waiting for them in their hospital room. Evelyn was still

experiencing night terrors as an aftereffect of the curse she was hit by, so the Healers were keeping her for a few more days. After kissing their Mother, Astoria and Phillip used the Floo to head to Rowan Hill for the foreseeable future.

Dobby settled the two into their rooms and Daphne promised a shopping trip that evening to begin to replace their clothing. They only had the clothes on their backs as it stood. Harry grabbed Daphne and pulled her into the atrium.

"Do you think your Mum would be Ok with me buying Phillip a Firebolt?"

"As long as you teach him how to fly it safely, yeah, I think she'd be Ok with it."

Harry nodded and an eager smile covered his face. Daphne just held his hand as they headed to the melee pit and Remus Lupin for their afternoon Defense lesson.

.oOo.

19 August 1996 Saturday

Harry and Daphne were dressing for a dinner party at the Abbotts this evening. Apparently, Reginald and Victoria had enjoyed the previous meeting at Rowan Hill and were inviting the Fifteen to dinner at their home, Stony Brook.

Harry came up behind her as Daphne put the finishing touches on her light application of makeup and asked, "What do you think about Sue and Nev?"

"Them opting out of Hogwarts as well?"

He just nodded into the mirror.

Daphne sighed and stood. "Obviously it's their choice. They are just as involved in the war as we are, and have as many duties and responsibilities as us. I really don't see much of a difference in their choice as ours."

Harry nodded again, a troubled look crossing his face.

She caressed his cheek and asked, "What is it, love?"

"I still have a lot of anger toward the Headmaster. It's a part of my reason for leaving formal education behind. I feel like we've corrupted them or something."

Daphne chuckled, shook her head gently and hugged her husband. "Don't ever change. Stay this sweet, considerate man who looks out for others before himself."

She looked up at him and stated, "Love, Sue and Nev are almost legal adults. They've passed their O.W.L.s and taken up their Head of House mantles. They can make up their own minds. Do you really think that Amelia or Lady Augusta would let them make a ridiculously stupid choice?"

Harry chuckled at the idea and kissed her forehead. "I love you wife. Thanks for straightening me out."

She gave him a quick kiss and smiled, "It's my job. It's in the handbook."

He crooked an eyebrow and asked, "Handbook? You have a handbook? I want one."

She gently patted his cheek and said, "Love, do you really think anyone could write a handbook on how to deal with a woman?" He laughed and put his arm around her as they walked out the door.

They met Neville and Susan in the Entry Hall standing close and sharing small smooches as they talked. "Ok you two, get a room or else," Harry mock-growled.

Neville very deliberately kissed Susan and gave Harry the bird at the same time. The foursome was still laughing as they used the Floo to whisk them away to Stony Brook.

The dinner party was much more fun this time for Harry and Daphne. They knew all present and were friendly, but rigidly proper with the elderly Boots. Formal with the stuffy Joneses, friendly with the Abbotts and MacMillans.

Richard and Sarah MacMillan were quite put out that they missed out on the planning and big vote for the defense spending and child endangerment law. Richard's proxy (his brother Mortimer) had filled him in on the details when they returned from holiday.

"Now see here, Potter," the genial Scot said in a semi-serious rebuke. "When you are planning large scale bills to be introduced, it is proper to notify all of us before you do so. I know Boot was quite put out and so was Jones. We are all making allowances for your inexperience, but, please, don't catch us out like that again."

Harry nodded soberly and Daphne could see the real remorse in his expression. She felt stupid, as she should have thought of that and told Harry to have a quick meeting with the others of the Fifteen. Common courtesy and politics are rarely used in the same sentence, but she saw that there could be serious opposition amongst the Fifteen if Harry continued to be discourteous.

"I shan't do it again, MacMillan. I apologize and shall do so to Boot and Jones before we leave tonight. I'm still trying to figure this all out."



Sarah poked her husband in the ribs as if to say, "See? I told you so."

Richard smiled broadly and said, "No harm done, Potter. No harm. So, I hear you four are not returning to school to finish up?"

Daphne responded, "It's true. With the war and Harry's need to get up to speed on his responsibilities as Potter and Black, plus our new charity that I'm running, we've resorted to private tutors to finish up for NEWTs."

The MacMillans nodded soberly. They were professional philanthropists and knew the effort required to run a first rate charity. Sarah asked, "If I might ask, who are your tutors?"

Daphne smiled a knowing smile and said, "Flitwick for charms, McGonagall for Transfiguration and Remus Lupin for Defense. We have an Auror or two help out with melee type dueling."

The MacMillan's eyes bugged out at that declaration. Lady Boot had silently joined the conversation and declared, "My word. Quite the accomplished tutors you have. Lupin, though, that name rings a bell in a less than savory context." The old lady paused and then her eyes narrowed. With a look of near-hostility, she accused, "You are allowing a werewolf into your home? Much less to teach you?"

Daphne felt Harry tense. Before he could rip the old woman's head off, she squeezed his arm and just smiled at the matron before asking the MacMillans, "So, how was India? We've never been, but from what I've read, it's a beautiful country."

The petite Sarah MacMillan smiled and slightly raised her glass to Daphne at her skilled ducking of a potentially messy conversation and began to fill all in about their grand tour. The arid beauty of the lowlands, complemented by the lush green jungle. The mountains leading up to the Magical Quarter of Katmandu, the gateway to nearby Shangri-La.

"India has such a richness about it. Granted there are very many poor, but the economy is thriving like must have been here in Britain in the 1600's. Even the smells have a power to them. You must travel to India." She smiled impishly at her husband, "And if you can coax your husband on to an elephant, ensure someone is standing by with a camera if he falls off in a spectacular fashion."

They all laughed at that. The evening continued and the meal was as sumptuous or even more so than the meal at Rowan Hill. Daphne leaned to her left and said to Reginald Abbott, "I hope we keep these parties up. The food keeps getting better. By the time we get to Green Hills, the food will be fit for the Queen." Reginald laughed in response to the compliment, saluting her with his wine glass.

.oOo.

21 August 1996 Monday

"Harry, Daphne, come with me. I think I might have a way to track down the disobedient children we've been discussing."

Since Evelyn came to Rowan Hill the day before, and Hermione's parents had been there for most of the month, Hermione had suggested the clandestine activities of the younger members of the household be kept quiet. Hence, the need for euphemisms like 'disobedient children' for the Death Eaters.

Daphne sat at the worktable, across from Hermione while Harry shut the doors. As Harry took his seat, he asked, "What do you have for us?"

"Scrying."

Harry broke out into a loud guffaw that caused an outraged huff from their bushy haired friend. "What's so funny Harry James?"

"You're resorting to a form of divination."

Daphne had a rough idea of Hermione's opinions based on their fledgling relationship and more based on Harry's stories of their third year. She chuckled when Hermione huffed again.

"If it's a viable method, I'll use it to find out these animals. It's not as if I'm running around wearing ridiculous clothing and prattling on about nonsense just to feel important. Scrying is a viable method to find a person. It's just very difficult."

Harry settled down, only pulling a face once or twice but that ceased after being repeatedly smacked by his wife and friend.

"I've been studying the process and it's extremely complicated. I'm going to practice over the next couple of days using the members of the household as control subjects. Once I can reliably scry for them, I'll branch out into the Death Eaters."

"Joking aside, Hermione, don't you think that the Ministry has already attempted this to find Voldemort and his senior Death Eaters?"

Hermione slumped in her chair, "I know they have. I talked with Amelia about it this morning and they tried it during the first Voldemort war and recently as well."

Harry had a confused expression and was about to ask 'Why bother, then?' when Daphne said, "Ohhhhh."

Hermione smirked, "Your wife understands Mr. Potter."

"She'll try for Voldemort or a senior Death Eater hoping to get lucky, but we can use scrying to root out the mid to low level Death Eaters that do a lot of the day-to-day damage."

Hermione nodded and continued with an excited voice, "Amelia said that if this is a promising path, either the Ministry will use it, or provide us with their list of Death Eaters for us to 'apprehend' as she put it."

Harry and Daphne both flickered their eyebrows at the use of the word 'apprehend', but said nothing. After a heartbeat, Hermione continued, "Guys, the best way to get superior information would be to actually capture one of the Death Eaters and then interrogate them. Preferably with a truth serum of some kind. That means you can't kill them all."

Harry pursed his lips as he considered the idea. It meant putting the team in danger. It is always much easier to kill a person than subdue them. A dead opponent can't curse back. As old Mad-Eye would have said, 'The only good Death Eater is a dead Death Eater'.

Daphne put her hand on his arm and said, "She's right. We should probably capture one every so often to interrogate."

Harry nodded his acquiescence. Hermione smiled and said, "Good, I'm glad you agree. This way, the Veritaserum I've already started won't go to waste."

.oOo.

24 August 1996 Thursday

Daphne was casting a wide area illusion charm when a burst of fire appeared right in front of her. She couldn't help the involuntary scream she shouted and a split second later recognized the originator of the fireball as Fawkes.

All spellcasting ceased as the immortal being of the Light approached Harry, trilling a soft song as he did so.

"Thanks Fawkes," was all Harry said as he removed the letter from

Fawkes' leg. Holstering his wand, Harry broke the seal and read the letter. Daphne crossed the room and examined the letter when he handed it to her.

It was short. A very polite request by Dumbledore to meet with Harry and Daphne and discuss their education. No threats or guilt inducing pleas, unlike his last missive.

Daphne had explained her position to her mother. Even though Evelyn legally had no say in the decision, she supported her and Harry completely in their decision.

"We going to go?"

After a long moment, Harry sighed and replied, "Can't hurt. It can't be a bad thing to make nice-nice with the Chief Warlock and Supreme Mugwump."

She wrapped her arms around him and lay her head on his chest, "But you'd rather scrape bat guano with an old shovel."

"But I'd much rather scrape bat guano with an old shovel. That, or Basilisk bits in the Chamber of Secrets."

Rolling her eyes at the silliness of her husband, she gave him a quick peck on the cheek and returned to her illusion while Harry scratched out a reply for Fawkes to convey.

After Defense practice that afternoon, the fireplace roared and Albus Dumbledore arrived. A very forbidding looking Dobby escorted the Headmaster to Harry's office where the Potters were reviewing some of the paperwork forwarded from their solicitors regarding BP Charities.

Harry looked up from the form he was reading and gave Dumbledore a slight smile and indicated a chair across from the large desk. "Good

afternoon Chief Warlock. Tea?"

"Thank you, my Lord. I believe a cup would go down nicely."

After pouring the Dobby provided tea for his former mentor and wife, Harry leaned back in his chair. Daphne picked up the thread as they had discussed.

"So what can we do for you Chief Warlock?"

Dumbledore sighed at the obvious implication behind both Potters using his Wizengamot title versus his Hogwarts title. He caught the point, but was stubborn enough to continue.

"My Lady, I've come today to entreat both you and your husband to return to Hogwarts to continue your education. I'm sure your husband has related to you the substance of the Prophecy?"

At Daphne's quick nod, he continued, "Then you can see why it is vital for both of you to continue your education. I shudder to think about what could happen, should you meet with Voldemort or his Death Eaters unprepared."

Daphne resisted the urge to laugh aloud at the preposterousness of Dumbledore's statement. Catching the eye roll from Harry, she said, "Sir, I...rather, we are most sensible of your consideration. Please do not trouble yourselves on our account. We have hired the best tutors in all of Britain to continue our education and have met daily over the last two months to further our education in the core wanded subjects, as well as, some of the more esoteric aspects of Defense."

Dumbledore's forehead furrowed slightly and he asked, "May I enquire as to your subjects studied and tutors?"

"We've been studying Charms, Transfiguration and Defense. We've also recently made arrangements for some instruction in ward

construction and breaking."

Dumbledore nodded, while Daphne continued, "We have too many responsibilities in the Wizengamot and with our other responsibilities to be able to attend a school. Tutors are our only option."

"I can allow you freedom of movement, as well as, private quarters in the castle."

Harry raised his eyebrows at Dumbledore's pathetic attempt, and spoke up for the first time in the dialogue. "No, means no. Hogwarts is only in our future as parents."

Dumbledore was going to press the issue again, but the resolute expressions on the teens sitting opposite him deterred his efforts. Nodding in resignation, he murmured, "Very well."

Harry nodded, concluding that portion of the discussion and asked, "Have you heard anything regarding Voldemort?"

Dumbledore sat back and pursed his lips, obviously considering. After a long moment, he responded, "Not much. He continues to send thirteen murdered muggles to the atrium every evening."

Daphne nodded, disgust evident on her face. "Amelia says that the Prime Minister is beginning to lose patience."

"Yes, I don't envy her those discussions. He has every right to be irate and yet we can't put an immediate stop to it." Shaking his head at the aggravation of the situation, he said, "I do not have any leads on the vigilantes who killed the Death Eaters in Knockturn Alley."

Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise and opined, "Bit of the pot calling the kettle black, you labeling anyone else as a vigilante?"

Daphne squeezed Harry's knee under the table. Play nice.

Harry nodded minutely and the rest of the discussion was innocuous. Dumbledore had no real information and the Potters were disinclined to reveal any of their own.

A/N

1. I own nothing. Thanks to any and all who have taken the time to drop a review. I appreciate it.

2. I've been getting quite a few reviews asking if To Stand Against the Darkness and All Because of a Hippogriff are still 'alive'. Yes. I will be finishing them both (or my wife will kill me). Partners has my muse right now, so I'll get to them when I get to them. Thanks for the interest.



## Chapter 10

05 September 1996 Tuesday

Harry sat at the breakfast table reading his letter from Hermione. "She says that Snape is doubly vindictive this year. The new Defense professor is an attractive woman and is apparently an even better teacher than Remus was. This Professor Quisling used Malfoy as the test dummy for the first class."

The other three at the table chuckled darkly. Neville loathed Snape probably even more than Harry and seemed to thrill on the man's jealousy. Malfoy suffering a measure of pain and humiliation was just frosting on the cake. Susan poked her boyfriend in the ribs when he got a dreamy expression on his face.

"What? I'm just fantasizing about Snape being even more incensed about his inadequateness than usual, while the amazing bouncing ferret does the jingle jangle," Neville protested.

Harry frowned as he read on. "Ron is being a pillock. He knows she spent a month here and isn't talking to her because he didn't get the same invite."

"If he wasn't such a completely self-centered ass, he might have," mumbled Daphne. Harry could only concede the point with a slight nod.

"The Headmaster hasn't cornered her yet, but she's waiting for a summons to his office." The Potters and Hermione had discussed this issue. Hermione brought up that she expected Dumbledore to try to use her friendship with Harry, in particular, to coerce the boy-who-lived to come back to Scotland.

"He'll just use Legilimency on me if I refuse to tell him anything, so what are you guys Ok with what I can tell him?"

Daphne tapped her nails and said, "No on the Shapeshifting."

"We need to get Minerva and Filius' permission to disclose their role. Remus and Tonks too," Harry added. He then smiled and said, "Better yet, tell him our Charms instructor is Rodger Young and Transfiguration is Jean Dubois."

With the beginning of term, McGonagall and Flitwick had to bow out of their daily tutelage of the foursome. The elder statesmen had highly recommended the new instructors by personal and professional repute. Young and Dubois were masters in their fields and had taken Unbreakable Vows with Harry, bound by Daphne, to never betray the foursome in any way, shape or form.

"A general overview." Daphne looked at Harry and continued, "Intense daily training in Charms, Transfiguration and Defense. We've got Bill Weasley coming next week to start wards."

Harry continued with Hermione's letter, "She's really glad to be back in school, but..." Harry's voice dwindled off. Daphne looked over at him and saw an incredible sadness cross his expression.

He looked to his wife and said just above a whisper, "She says she doesn't have any friends at school now."

Daphne could only squeeze his hand in comfort.

.oOo.

Bill Weasley arrived at three PM after a tiring melee round with Remus and Tonks going against each couple. They'd intentionally picked the teamings by couple because as Remus said, "You are not trusting your significant other to protect themselves. Harry, you keep shielding Daphne and Neville you do the same with Susan. Susan, if you conjure a wall to protect Neville one more time when he's not

incapacitated, you'll be doing laps around the estate – in human form mind."

"If you would stay closer together, you'll find you can protect yourselves and each other better," Tonks advised.

Remus and Tonks worked together rather well. Despite her habitual clumsiness, Tonks was a smooth fighter. Darting left and right, slipping curses in under a person's guard when they least expected it.

Remus was power and craftiness. He couldn't overpower Harry, whose raw power levels grew every day as he recuperated from the power-draining ward. Instead, he'd pummel Harry's shields and then apparate behind hitting him with a trip jinx or the like. Once off balance, the two would really open up on each other.

One time, Daphne and Tonks had stopped dueling just to watch the men beat on each other. At one point, Daphne heard Tonks mutter, "Damn, he's hot."

With Daphne looking at the metamorph with raised eyebrows, Tonks hissed, "Mine, not yours!"

Bill emerged from the fireplace in the Entry Hall and let out an involuntary whistle at the beauty of the Hall. Harry was sitting in a chair, dozing lightly. While the heir of clan Weasley debated on whether to wake the younger man, Harry roused and gave him a small smile. "Come on, we'll go to the library."

Daphne and Susan were to be the primary students for Bill, but Harry and Neville had 'decided' that they would sit in the instruction to learn what they could. At least Daphne and Susan had decided.

After a quick discussion to ascertain where the ladies stood in regards to wards, Runes and Arithmancy, Bill launched into an

overview lecture that enthralled all four students. Surprisingly, Neville asked the most questions and after a bit, Bill paused and said, "Guys, a good book to get a foundation for what we'll be discussing is Runes and Wards, A Beginners Reader. I know it sounds pretty simple, but it does a good job of covering the basics."

At this, the guys fell silent, although Harry left for a minute with the name of the book on a scrap of parchment. Dobby returned twenty minutes later and handed Harry two copies of the book. Neville and Harry began reading in the back of the library, while Bill and the ladies delved deeply into the topics.

.oOo.

06 September 1996 Wednesday

During lunch, an unfamiliar owl arrived with a note for Harry. He set down his fork and stiffly reached out for the note. Daphne stood and walked behind her husband to massage his shoulders. Rodger Young had been especially fierce in training today and Harry had taken a few Bludgeoning curses to his upper back.

Reading over his shoulder, she saw it was another letter from Hermione. In an uncharacteristic scrawl, she had hurriedly written that she finally had reliably used scrying to locate some of their prey. Apparently, there were four or five Death Eaters using the Nott Manor in Kent as their base of operations.

Harry didn't say anything, as Evelyn was at table with them. He just handed the letter to Neville, who was eating lunch with them this day. After a quick scan, Neville showed it to Susan and then handed it back to Harry, affecting a boredom that the four friends could easily see was feigned.

After lunch, the friends adjourned to Daphne's office for a quick council. Susan sat heavily on a Queen Anne settee and asked,

"Reconnaissance tonight and tomorrow; go the day after?"

Harry nodded. "Sue, could you look up the area? Check out nearby neighbors, natural features and the like?"

The strawberry-blond nodded and moved to Daphne's desk and began scribbling notes and ideas.

.oOo.

At two AM, the four took a portkey that Susan had made. It deposited them in a small ravine, hidden on all four sides. The terrain was fairly flat with a few ravines scattered about the landscape. The moon was gibbous and waxing to the full, plenty of light to see.

The idea was for Susan to go aloft and visually confirm what she had found in her research at the local non-magical library. The other three would transform, but stay in the general vicinity of their arrival in case things went pear shaped. The next night, they'd venture out in pairs to see with their own eyes the map that Susan was building for them.

The Nott estate was a moderate sized holding that was heavily wooded. In days past, many magical families had ensured their homes were surrounded by dense woods to keep out muggles. Now, it was a convoluted mark of distinction to have ones ancestral home be ringed by dense trees. The nearest neighbors of the Notts were over a mile away.

As soon as they arrived, they all froze and listened. They had agreed not to use magic during reconnaissance, just their eyes and ears. After hearing nothing for a full minute, Susan seamlessly transformed and was off.

Daphne shifted into The Wolf and climbed to the edge of the ravine to peek over and see what there was to see. Through the dense ashes and alders, she could see lights but little else. There was a vague

murmur to be heard, but it could have been moving water as easily as human discussion.

After a bit of digging, she settled down to watch and wait. Looking around, she saw her compatriots doing the same in an odd triangle formation. She could barely see The Bear, his blondish-brown fur blended into the underbrush, hiding the 700-pound ursine surprisingly well.

The Tiger was nowhere to be seen. His striped camouflage made him effectively invisible in the underbrush. She thought she caught a few flickers of shine from his eyes, but nothing sure. The sounds of the night continued and twenty minutes later, The Hawk landed at the bottom of the ravine. The three great predators ambled down the sides and Susan transformed into her human self. She activated her portkey back to Rowan Hill, followed by the others.

A quiet night's work. Hopefully, it would continue that way.

.oOo.

07 September 1996 Thursday

"Everything was laid out as expected. A rectangular manor house with entrances in front and back. Large garden in the back with a sloping front lawn to a small stream."

Susan was debriefing the team on her observances and had hit the sticking point. "I saw two men on the back steps. One was smoking a pipe and they were obviously talking. I couldn't tell if they were a guard or just outside for a pipe and chatting. I watched them on and off the entire time and they just stood there chatting. Even when the one finished his pipe."

Daphne said, "We should assume they are sentries. If they aren't we lose nothing. If they are, we take them down fast." Everyone nodded

at that.

"Did you have any problem getting close to the house?" Neville asked.

With a wicked smile, Susan answered, "Not really. When I landed on the chimney, there was no ward reaction."

Neville glared at her in concern while Daphne laughed into her hand. She'd known Susan was a bit sarcastic, but she'd become bold and daring as well. "Well, we figured that. Since we aren't Animagi but rather the actual animal, the ward ought not trip. Magically, it's very different."

Harry nodded. "Ok, we go back and all four of us explore a bit. Daph and I will scout out a minimum of four egress routes per the compass points. You two," he pointed at Neville and Susan, "I want you to find us approach routes to the house with a maximum of cover." He paused, then added, "Two different assumptions: first, we are in our forms all the way to the house and second, we have to shift back shortly after we cross the wards."

Neville nodded, a far away look in his eyes. After a long moment, he half stated, half asked, "All Death Eaters go down hard, that's a given. What about the spouses and children that may be in the house?"

There was quiet around the room at this question. Daphne sipped her tea and opined, "We should cover our faces. Just in case a non-combatant sees us. I'm not good enough yet to be casting snap Memory Charms. If the kid or spouse gets away, they could identify us. I don't want to see the firestorm it would create if 'Poor Mrs. Nott was attacked by those big mean Potters'."

Susan muttered, "An obscuring charm would be best. I want to double check, but I think I know a good one."

That night, the foursome prowled, flew and stalked about the Nott estate, no one the wiser. The next night was to be a wake up call for Tom Marvolo Riddle Jr. and his forces. They weren't so safe in the darkness anymore.

.oOo.

08 September 1996 Friday

Training was rather rigorous that day. Young and Dubois had combined their class for the day and made an obstacle course for each student. The only way to survive the course had been through the use of advanced Transfiguration and Charms

"Survive?" Daphne had asked.

Her only response had been from Young: a smirk. Rodger Young was a big beefy man with yellow blond hair. When they first met, Daphne had a fleeting impression of Gilderoy Lockhart. However, once the man opened his mouth, the resemblance had been banished. He was an intensely focused man who sucked all those in hearing distance into the vortex of his personality. A passionate scholar, he'd been researching mass animating charms for the previous ten years.

They'd all successfully navigated their courses with minimal bumps, bruises and scrapes. Harry sustained quite a few cuts on his chest when he had been swiped at by a transfigured and animated claw that was waiting in a tree for him.

Neville had been pummeled by twenty boots that had been animated to kick him when he closed within ten feet. They'd been disillusioned and only a high-powered Incendio had reduced the attacking footwear to ash.

Susan had tripped an activating ward that caused multiple lynx to be transfigured from the surrounding brush. She'd cheated (so Dubois



said), and shifted to The Hawk to escape the immediate attack. Landing twenty feet away, she changed back and reversed the Transfiguration with a flick of her wand.

Daphne had been tripped up by not looking where she was going. After Harry had been attacked from above, Neville and Susan from the sides, she hadn't been watching the ground right in front of her. Just as she extended her booted foot, she felt the magical illusion and shouted "SHIT!" as she fell in the pit.

Automatically casting a Banishing charm at the bottom of the pit, she propelled herself up and out of the hole, doing a forward flip as she exited. Landing on her feet, she immediately Disillusioned herself. She ended up having to fight her way through a series of animated chains, ropes and cables.

Becoming annoyed with the attack, Daphne spot apparated a short distance up the path, past the apparent source of the ropes. She cast a series of Blasting charms in a wide arc, destroying any sources of raw material for the remote Transfigurations.

The other three had waited for Daphne at the end of her course. Harry cocked an eyebrow at her and her response was, "Weird test." The other three nodded in agreement.

"It was meant to be unusual," a calm voice replied from behind her.

Daphne dove to her left, while Harry and Neville transformed and charged the sound of the voice. Susan began laying down a rapid-fire pattern of Stunning spells and Binding charms.

Daphne rolled to her feet and imitated Susan, but from a 90 degree off angle position. Before The Bear and Tiger could reach the target area, a Disillusioned form had been stunned twice and bound in a considerable length of rope and chain.

The Bear and Tiger both closed and sniffed the bound figure before reverting to their human form. Harry cast the Ending spell and then softly muttered, "Ennervate."

Jean Dubois was released from his bonds. Now visible, their new Transfiguration instructor was also visibly annoyed. "People," he said with a hint of his French Canadian origins, "I give you all passing grades for your behavior in your individual courses, but you all failed just now. Why?"

Daphne said in a small voice, "We overreacted."

Dubois glared at the four friends and said, "Exactly. Your response was appropriate for a force of ten Death Eaters, not me. You knew it was me by my voice. The wards here are completely unbreakable, so no enemy can penetrate." Pointing his finger at them, he said, "You are all very intelligent. Use your brains."

He stalked off, leaving four embarrassed people to head back to the house for lunch.

.oOo.

Bill was packing up his kit after the Ward lecture and asked, "Harry, Daphne could I talk to you two for a minute?"

The Potters retook their seats and Daphne reached over to take her husband's hand. She played with his wedding ring for a bit until Bill sat across from them.

"Look, I realize that what I'm about to bring up is really none of my business." He paused and ran his left hand through his long ruby locks. "It's about my Dad."

Daphne and Harry both frowned in concern. Bill continued, "He's still pretty upset about the last time you three talked. He tore Ron to

pieces and yelled at Mum until she was in tears."

Harry's eyes widen in surprise at this pronouncement. He muttered, "That doesn't sound like Arthur."

"No, it doesn't," Bill agreed. "He was incredibly embarrassed by Mum and Ron's behavior, especially after you've saved his and Ginny's life. Like I said before, it's really none of my business, but would you guys consider talking to him? Setting him at ease a bit? I'm thinking that you're not holding a grudge about the retarded brother of mine or the rudeness of my hot-tempered mother."

Daphne shook her head and Harry exhaled loudly. Glancing at Daphne first, Harry said, "I'm sorry he's upset Bill. I overreacted. Your Dad is a good and honorable man and I steamrolled him when all that was needed was an honest discussion." He put his head in his hands and Daphne rubbed his back.

Harry sat up straight and asked, "Could you please ask your Father if he would consider joining us for lunch tomorrow so that I can apologize for my boorish behavior in person?"

Bill nodded and said, "Don't beat yourself up too much, Harry. Mum and Ron were way out of line and to an extent, Dad had it coming. He's never really reigned Mum, Ron or Ginny in and it came home to roost that day."

Daphne and Harry looked at the eldest Weasley child in surprise and he laughed at their reaction. With a big grin, he asked, "Why do you think the oldest two kids have left their overprotective mother and moved to different continents? Well, at least I did and Charlie is a hop, skip and a jump from Asia. If it weren't for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named returning, I would have taken an opening in Thailand and gone to Gringotts Southeast Asia."

.oOo.

At exactly 0230, four figures in black clothes appeared in a ravine near the Nott estate.

The four friends immediately shifted forms and proceeded on their primary ingress route. Daphne was leading the way, followed by Harry and Neville. Susan was overhead and would meet them at the back entrance if all were well. If there were a disturbance in their plan, she would intercept them en route.

Moving quickly, The Wolf darted down the small animal track that led right into the clearing that held the Nott home. She could smell The Tiger and Bear behind her and feel their heavy treads. It was reassuring that the 'big guns' were right behind her.

With a canine grin she thought, I am a wolf though. Don't need too much backup.

A tingling sensation passed over her snout, across her head and down her back. The wards. We're in.

Slowing to minimize noise, she began scanning more intently with sight and smell. There was a small herd of deer off to her right. Apparently, they'd caught her scent and that of her companions because the deer were moving away at a quick pace, not even bothering to try to be quiet. I guess a wolf, bear and tiger would scare off deer.

The woods abruptly began to thin and the house became visible through the trees so The Wolf stopped in the middle of the path per the plan. Harry moved up to her left and Neville to her right. They stood in silence for a few minutes, waiting for someone to move or show himself or herself.

Harry gave a huffing exhale that was the signal to proceed. Daphne sprinted across the lawn to the back door. Running up the steps

without missing a beat, she hid herself under the shadows of the small portico and transformed back to her human self.

They waited again, but no one was evident. The crickets and tree frogs were still silent, so they couldn't dawdle. Anyone who lived in the country for any period of time would notice the silence immediately.

Now, The Bear moved with incredible speed for an animal his size. Shortly, Neville stood beside Daphne, his hard eyes searching right, while Daphne looked left. A soft flutter of wings announced Susan's arrival. She transformed and moved to stand behind Daphne. They all waited.

Silence.

Daphne gave a loud exhale; the signal to Harry that all was clear and they were ready. All three humans moved away from the door and watched the lawn. The Tiger sprinted across the grass, a streaking dark shape in the moonlight. It didn't even pause as it gathered all of its five hundred pounds into a coiled mass and sprung at the back door, smashing it to flinders.

Before The Tiger hit the floor, he was transforming back to Harry. Daphne, Neville and Susan boiled in the door, wands at the ready. They relentlessly moved down a long hallway as Harry stood up and followed the group.

A large man with sleep-mussed hair came out of a room on the left of the hallway, his wand in hand. Daphne glanced at the exposed arm, saw what she was looking for and cast. A silent Reductor curse ended the Death Eater's career and service to the Dark Lord.

Scanning left, right, up and down they heard running on the second floor. Approaching the main staircase, Neville and Susan swiftly moved upstairs, while Harry and Daphne were to secure the main

floor and the basement.

Glancing at her husband, she gave him a quick smile through the Obscuring charm on her face to let him know that she was fine. He nodded back and indicated over his shoulder with his thumb.

Follow me and cover my back.

She nodded and fell in behind him. Spellfire from the upstairs made them both pause for a second, and then they ghosted down the hallway into the north wing of the main floor. There was a racket from the stairs at the end of the hall. Must be coming up from the basement.

Acting without hesitation, Harry and Daphne Shifted and sprinted the length of the hallway. They arrived at the door to the cellar just as it opened. The screams of terror from the three Death Eaters changed to gurgles as their life's blood poured from fatal wounds.

Daphne Shifted again to watch the hallway while Harry looked down the stairs. She indicated that she was going to investigate the other rooms off the hallway, while he watched the stairs from the cellar. Giving her a quick kiss, he nodded and a pat on the bum.

Ruefully smiling at him, she moved out. The library and drawing room were both empty. No one was in the kitchen either. She thought about checking for elves, but since they had decided not to torch the home, any hiding elves would be safe. Just to be thorough, she silently cast the Human Revealing spell: *Hominem Revealo*. The only responses she got were upstairs, congregated in one room.

Hurrying back to Harry, she whispered the result in his ear and he nodded. They made a cursory sweep through the cellar to be thorough, finding no one. However, they did find crates and crates of potion supplies. With a wicked grin, Daphne started shrinking the crates and stuffing them in her knapsack. Harry caught on and

smiling, did the same.

At the main stairs, they found Neville and Susan waiting for them with ashen faces. With a quick gesture, they opened the front door, Shifted and were gone. The four friends were in the house for a total of six minutes. Nine Death Eaters had passed to the next great adventure. Overall, a good night's work, Mad-Eye would have been proud.

.oOo.

They arrived at Rowan Hill separately. Each had a series of four apparition jumps taking them all over Britain, and in Harry's case, Ireland too. They congregated in Harry's office, Daphne dropping onto Harry's lap as the tension ebbed out of her, taking her energy with it.

Susan arrived, plopped down on the couch and laid her head back. Neville was right behind her and sat next to her, causing the redhead to cuddle up to 'her bear'.

"Any problems?" Harry asked.

After a long pause, Neville said, "Yes and no. I almost cut a kid in half with a Cutter. After I opened a bedroom door, I saw a shadow move. I was casting before I even processed what I was seeing. Fortunately, I pulled my wand up when I saw the pajamas with dancing teddy bears. Shook me up. We got five upstairs. There were two women who didn't have the mark. We left all the non-marked people in the master bedroom per the plan and came downstairs."

Harry nodded and quirked an eyebrow at Susan as if to ask, "Anything to add?"

Susan merely shook her head in negation and resumed cuddling.

Daphne mimicked her friend and was sound asleep before she knew it.

.oOo.

09 September 1996 Saturday

They all slept in and took the day off from working out. Daphne and Susan went on a short run down the beach and were walking up to the veranda as their men stumbled out to the table.

Daphne elbowed Susan playfully and said, "If Neville wants to stay here so much, I can have Dobby make him up a room. You don't have to share yours with him."

Susan blushed beet red and just quickened her pace to Daphne's laughing cat-calls.

After plating up her breakfast, she kissed Harry on the crown of his head and sat next to him. She poured them both their morning tea – hot and strong - and settled down with the paper.

"Love, Puddlemere is playing the Tornadoes in two weeks. Let's go."

Harry nodded and replied, "I'll owl Oliver, he probably could get us good seats."

Neville chuckled across the table. Harry looked at him quizzically and Longbottom of Longbottom said, "Harry, buy a part of the team and you get your own box."

Daphne turned to him with an excited look. She was bouncing in her seat like a six year old on Christmas Eve. Her expression screamed, "Please, Please, Please!" Phillip was on the other side of the table, eyes wide in anticipation.



Harry smiled ruefully and shook his head. "I'll have to check that out, Nev. Thanks."

"No problem," he smirked. Wiping his face, he stood and said, "I've got a luncheon with Gran today. It's her favorite charity, so I always go with her." Looking at Susan with pleading eyes, he asked, "Would you like to come?"

Susan wiped her mouth and stood, "I'll get cleaned up and dressed. Meet you at Green Hills in an hour or so?" She gave him a quick kiss and bounded into the house.

Neville watched her go with a small smile and an expression of wonder on his face. Harry saw it and with a hint of laughter in his voice, stated, "You wonder how you ever got so lucky to have her when you feel so very undeserving."

Neville gave a quick shake of his head and nodded.

Softly, Daphne said, "Neville, she loves you."

Now the sandy haired young man's grin was in full bloom. "Good, 'cause I love her." He made his way to the entry hall and Daphne heard a small pop as he apparated away.

.oOo.

Harry and Phillip were flying overhead on their Firebolts. Phillip had moments of blinding speed, followed by a shaky stop or turn. Astoria was wandering in the woods and Evelyn was napping. Daphne sat in the grass of the Pitch, the sun warm on her face. Her Runes book was in her lap and she was reading off and on.

Her distraction was her life. She marveled at how completely her life had changed in two and a half months. Before her mother had gone up to her rooms to rest, she'd given Daphne a kiss on the forehead

and whispered, "I'm so happy for you blue eyes."

Her wand emitted a high-pitched squeal and she looked at her watch. Noting the time, she cast a Noisemaker charm to get Harry and Phillip's attention. Harry looked down and when Daphne pointed to her watch, he nodded and said something to Phillip. The two flyers headed off to the house while Daphne strolled up the lawn, trying to milk every moment of its happiness.

.oOo.

Harry came downstairs from cleaning up and kissed his wife on the head. The Greengrasses were going to eat lunch in the family dining room, while the Potters and Arthur Weasley were going to eat on the veranda. Daphne thought the informal setting would help reinforce Harry's desire to make amends for his heavy handedness.

Daphne hadn't said anything, but she felt very guilty about the whole situation. She had been informally tutoring Harry on his roles and responsibilities as a Head of House and head of a family when everything blew up. There was a feeling that she failed him in this instruction which led to his bruising the feelings of Arthur.

She knew she was smart. She knew that she had quite a bit of experience in society and societal matters. However, she also knew that her pride sometimes stiffened her neck so she wouldn't admit if she were ignorant of a topic.

Standing, she gave Harry a deep kiss and silently vowed to be more honest with him in the future. Arthur Weasley was a good, decent man by all accounts and Harry had hurt him. She didn't want that to happen again, if she could prevent it.

The fireplace roared twice in quick succession and instead of Dobby greeting the lunch guests, Harry and Daphne hurried to greet the Weasleys personally. Rounding the corner, she saw the two Weasley

men brushing the ash from each other. Arthur finally whipped out his wand and cast two quick cleansing charms. First on his son, then on himself. He can't help but be a father.

Looking up, the redheads saw the Potters approaching. Watching his father, Bill took a step back to let the meet happen. Arthur noticeably set his jaw as Harry approached.

Harry stopped and took a steadying breath. This morning he'd recounted all the ways that Arthur Weasley had shown him a kindness, great or small. At the end of the recitation, she could see he felt even lower than before.

"Mr. Weasley, I'm very sorry for my behavior the last time we spoke. I was boorish, overbearing, arrogant and wholly inappropriate." Harry faltered a bit and then said, "I'm really very sorry."

Arthur watched the Potter lord and then surprised Daphne. Slowly approaching the young man he put both hands on the young man's shoulders and gently asked, "So what did you learn?"

After a shaky breath, Harry replied, "Don't go into a tense situation angry."

Arthur gave his gentle half smile and said, "Good," before wrapping his arms around the young man. Harry returned the hug with gusto and when they broke apart, it seemed that all four present surreptitiously wiped their eyes.

"Harry, no matter your behavior, your complaint was valid. I have to take responsibility. Part of a marriage is honesty and I never objected to my Molly's more...loud...behaviors. I've since rectified that, but I don't expect change overnight.

"Ronald...well, you know him as well as I do. That boy speaks before he thinks and doesn't do much thinking either." Shaking his head in

bewilderment he continued, "Don't expect him to change much."

Harry half laughed and took Daphne's hand. She gave him a squeeze of support and in a genial tone, asked the group, "Who's hungry? Dobby has laid on a feast for us."

Showing his Weasley roots, Bill rubbed his hands together and said, "Well, let's not disappoint him then," to general laughter.

Lunch went smashingly. Relaxed discussion sprinkled with laughter. Toward the end of the meal, Harry and Arthur began to talk 'shop'. Arthur filled Harry in regarding the ins and outs of day-to-day life at the Ministry. How the bureaucracy worked, or didn't work as the case may be.

A quick pop from the Entry Hall announced Amelia's return from a half day at the Ministry. As she ate a late lunch, she joined in the discussion. It was an amazingly frank dissection of the Ministry from two knowledgeable persons. Both long-term Ministry employees illuminated the positives and negatives of their workplace.

"It's hard to affect real change," Amelia whinged. When Harry frowned at her, she raised both hands, palms out and said, "I know I'm the Minister, but if there is no real support amongst the department heads for the change, they won't enforce the new regulations. If they won't enforce the regulations, then they aren't implemented. See?"

Harry looked at her as if she was two year old. "Then replace the department heads."

Daphne sniggered into her hand. She and Bill had been discussing some of his more colorful adventures in cursebreaking, but Harry's statement stopped all discussion as Amelia gaped at him like a fish.

"You don't have to fire them all, just threaten it. They work for you

after all." With a roguish grin, he said, "I think I can help scrounge up enough support for you in the Wizengamot."

Daphne poked him in the ribs and the table chuckled.

"Harry, it's not that simple. Some of these people are extraordinarily good at their jobs and others have serious political support of their own."

Daphne piped up, "For the professionals, if you explain your desire for positive change and recruit them to your team, they become part of the solution, right? If they 'decline', well then you beat them about the face and neck with a big stick. The Politicos, well, isn't your niece one of the Fifteen? Isn't she dating another of the Fifteen? And aren't you living in the home of the only person in history to have two votes of the Fifteen?"

Arthur had a contemplative expression on his face and turned to face his boss. Granted, his division was one of the smallest in the Ministry, but he was still an experienced division head. He gave Amelia a little shrug and said, "It might work, ma'am."

Amelia had a faraway look in her eyes, obviously lost in thought. After a moment, her eyes focused again and she said, "Quite. You've given me much to consider. It's always good to have an outsider's view, thank you."

There was a loud crack from the Entry Hall, which caused both Daphne and Harry to frown. It was far too early for Neville and Susan to be back. She saw him mentally checking the wards so she drew her wand. Standing, she saw him do the same.

Before they could move to the Entry Hall, a disheveled Susan ran outside. "Death Eaters attacked the luncheon; Lady Augusta is in St. Mungo's!"

.oOo.

This time, Amelia led the way down the hallway at St. Mungo's. The result was the same; people scattered at the thunderstorm on the brow of the Minister for Magic. When they neared the high security area of the spell damage wing, Amelia peeled off to talk to Connie Hammer, her Director of the MLE while the Potters and Susan went on to find Neville and Lady Augusta.

Daphne entered the room on Susan's heels. Sitting on a chair next to Lady Augusta's bed was Neville. He was leaning forward, his head in his hands. The room was completely silent. Susan glided to her boyfriend's side and silently put her arms around him, comforting where she could.

He didn't look up, merely patted her arm with his left hand and gave her a small squeeze.

"Nev, how is she?" Harry asked.

"Concussion, internal injuries, multiple broken bones. Healer says the bones are already on the mend and so too are most of her other injuries. They had to remove and re-grow both her liver and spleen." Neville looked up at his friend, an expression of helpless rage on his face. "That's what they're most concerned about now. A support beam in the ceiling failed and half crushed her."

Daphne now embraced her two friends as well. Harry conjured up a few more chairs and then put his hand on Neville's shoulder. "She'll be up and around before you know it," Daphne declared.

Neville responded with a hopeful nod.

Afternoon became evening. Daphne ordered four meals sent up and Susan shoved Neville's under his nose, else he might not have eaten at all.

"Eat, or I'll transform and peck out some vital body part," she threatened with an amused glare. This must have been a joke between them, as Neville gave the first true smile of the day before he dug in to his food.

At eight in the evening, the Sister came by and gently escorted them out of the room.

"You head on back to Rowan Hill, I've some things I want to do and will be there shortly," Neville said to Susan. She looked at him quizzically and he gave her a weak smile.

Daphne caught the exchange. With a look of concern, she apparated home with Harry and Susan.

.oOo.

It was one thirty in the morning, when Neville finally arrived in the Entry Hall of Rowan Hill. He was carrying an overnight bag which he had packed four hours earlier at Green Hills and then after shrinking it, stuck in his pocket. Quietly moving down the hall to the main staircase, Neville froze when a voice from the study said, "You took your time with your errands."

Daphne couldn't see it, but Neville's shoulders sagged when he heard her voice. The house was completely silent, so her conversational tone carried easily to him in the hall.

She rose and slowly walked out into the hall to talk to him but stopped and gasped at what she saw. "Are you wounded?" she asked in a worried tone.

Looking down at his sodden robes, Neville said in a somewhat regretful yet defiant voice, "It's not my blood."

Daphne's expression fell. She was afraid he'd do this. With a heavy heart, she asked, "Where?"

"Speckled Basilisk."

"How many?"

"I killed them all."

With a groan of disbelief, her head fell and she covered her face in her hands. "Oh gods, Neville." After a long moment, she asked, "How many were Death Eaters?"

She felt his shame like a palpable presence. "I don't know. They were there, so I killed them. At the time, I thought that if they were in that hellhole, they were Death Eaters or sympathizers and that was good enough."

In a flash of unadulterated anger, she glared at Neville and turned on her friend, "If you hurt Harry or what he needs to do, I'll kill you myself."

Neville stood there, shocked into stillness and silence. Finally, he nodded.

As quickly as it arrived, her anger bled into the darkness of the night to be replaced with an overwhelming sadness.

Neville continued to stand there and after a moment, he asked, "Daphne, are you crying?"

She turned away from her friend and said, "I'm crying for your soul." She left him standing in the Entry Hall and went to bed.

.oOo.



When she got to the Master Suite, she went to the toilet and washed her face before climbing in bed next to Harry.

"What happened?" he asked.

She jumped at the sound of his voice and then curled up to his side, needing his comfort this night.

"Neville."

Harry pulled her close and sighed at the gilded ceiling. After a long moment he whispered, "I was afraid he'd do that." He nuzzled close to her and whispered, "I'll talk to him tomorrow."

.oOo.

10 September 1996 Sunday

After their run, Harry patted Neville on the shoulder and indicated toward the gardens. Daphne intercepted Susan and herded her toward the family Dining Room for breakfast. Susan looked quizzically at her friend, the unvoiced question hanging in the air. Daphne just shook her head and plated up breakfast.

Opening the Prophet, Daphne saw the report of the massacre on the front page. Right now, the Aurors were reporting that they believed it to be the work of the larger organized crime syndicates. Apparently, Neville had killed two of the major crime bosses in one of the back rooms.

The women ate in silence, which became oppressive as first Amelia and then Evelyn came down for breakfast. Eventually, the two men came in, both red eyed. Harry had his arm across Neville's shoulder, and it was obvious that both had wept recently.

Harry just nodded to Daphne while Neville sat next to Susan. She

hugged her boyfriend and then rose when he indicated he wanted to talk to her out on the grounds.

Daphne watched with a heavy heart, knowing that he must be terrified Susan would leave him after his shameful admission. She shook her head and resumed her perusal of the paper while Harry uncharacteristically wolfed down his breakfast.

They went upstairs in silence to get cleaned up. As the Master Suite door closed, Daphne asked, "Well?"

Entering the bathroom, Harry shaved while Daphne showered. "He told me about what he did and then apologized." He looked at Daphne meaningfully and continued, "Apparently, he feels that he has hurt me in some way."

She stepped into the shower and wet her hair before saying, "Funny, that."

"Yes, well, he realizes that he crossed a line last night." Harry's head dropped and he said, "He asked me if I wanted him to leave our group now that he was no better than a Death Eater."

Daphne paused while washing the soap out of her hair, waiting for him to continue. "I told him that he was not anywhere close to being a Death Eater and that I still considered him on the side of the light. One of my brothers." Daphne exhaled, but something was still missing.

"I also said, that if he did it again, freelance hunting without discriminating friend from foe, I'd take him down myself." Harry rinsed the residual shaving cream from his face and waited his turn in the shower. Normally, he would've had no problem joining her in the shower, but not this morning.

Daphne cut off the water and used her wand to dry off quickly.

Donning her dressing gown, she went to her vanity to do up her hair while he showered. His words to Neville made her think. Was the target the only thing that separated them from Death Eaters?

She paused after finishing her hair. Looking through her reflection, she pondered the differences between the 'light' and the 'dark'.

The dark wanted to dominate. To take for themselves and would use any methods necessary to accomplish their goals, usually delighting in the more twisted and sadistic methods.

The light wanted to protect. To give of themselves to protect what they determined to be justice and so to protect society as a whole. These were nebulous terms, she realized, but for the sake of her inner discussion, it worked.

The means. As a whole, the dark used any means they could. Usually, the more painful and destructive methods to accomplish their goals. They crowed that their cruelty cowed the weak into obedience.

The light usually drew a seemingly arbitrary line in the sand saying 'this far but no further'. It was actually rather ridiculous. If using the Killing curse was necessary to rid the world of Voldemort, it would be worth the damage to the individual who cast it. Wouldn't it? What if it was Harry? What if it were herself? It would still be worth it, wouldn't it?

Wouldn't it?

More questions with no ready answers.

.oOo.

Daphne was in her office, sorting through the stack of parchment the

solicitors had sent on the non-profit incorporation of BP Charities and all that entailed. She had a list of things that she needed to get done, first and foremost on her list was to get a competent chief of staff.

With a little grin on her face, she mused to herself, Hope I can steal Hermione from Harry.

The male object of her musings strolled in the room and moved behind her. Without bidding, he began to massage her shoulders, upper arms and neck. With a groan, she said, "Ohhhh, you're hired. You start today."

He chuckled and continued his ministrations. After a bit, he moved to a chair off to the side of the room and just sat there, watching her.

"What?" she asked.

"Just watching my favorite person."

"Flatterer. What do you want?"

He shook his head and gave her a little grin. "Nothing. I just love you."

She gave him a wide grin, rose from her chair and plopped down in his lap. After a thorough kissing, she whispered in his ear, "Shall we adjourn to somewhere more comfortable, Mr. Potter?"

"I was just thinking that myself, Mrs. Potter," he smiled in return.

Hand-in-hand they made their way to the door when one of the last people they expected barreled into them.

Richard Granger was wild-eyed as he shouted, "Hermione was attacked last night! We need you to get us to Hogwarts!"

.oOo.

Twenty-five minutes later and after two quick portkeys, the four friends led the Grangers down the hallways of Hogwarts Castle toward the infirmary. Rounding a corner, they ran into Professor McGonagall who was exiting the ward and heading toward them.

Daphne was very glad to see their summer tutor. After a very uninspired start, Daphne came not only to like, but respect the stern Scot. Her sincerity in pledging herself to support Harry and his interests had been sincere, impressing Daphne.

"Minerva," Harry said in relief. "How is she?"

Glancing to the Grangers, she answered his question to them. "She is stable. Last night, just after ten PM, she was performing her prefect patrols with Mr. Boot from Ravenclaw." She paused, gathering the right words.

"After turning the corner on the fourth floor coming away from the library," the former Hogwarts students nodded in comprehension, "Multiple spells were cast from behind them. A Killing curse hit Mr. Boot."

Gasps from some and wide eyed staring from Harry and Daphne. A student cast the Killing curse?

"Yes," McGonagall confirmed the unasked question somberly. "Miss Granger was hit in the back of the left hip with a poorly cast Cutting curse which almost severed her leg. Fortunately, Mr. Creevey was returning from the library at a late hour and found them almost immediately and summoned help."

Alice Granger almost fainted at the description of her daughter's wounds and as she caught her breath, her husband asked, "How is she now?"

"Madam Pomfrey has been plying your daughter with blood replenishing potions. She lost almost half her blood before help could arrive. Miss Granger is currently unconscious, but Madam Pomfrey is very optimistic that she'll make a full recovery."

Nodding, the Grangers made their way through the doors into the ward. Harry held the Transfiguration mistress with his eyes and asked, "Who?"

Exhaling loudly, McGonagall was far more unguarded than she'd ever been when any of the four were students. "I don't know."

"The Aurors have been called?" he pressed.

A minute shake of her head conveyed the answer. Harry looked down and Daphne could tell he was doing everything he could to master his temper. He failed.

"Dammit Minerva! Are you the Deputy Headmistress or not! Do the right thing on your own hook! Hermione could have died and Terry Boot did!"

Glaring at Harry for a long minute, she eventually nodded and headed to her office and the Floo connection there. Harry started to head to the Headmaster's Office to confront Dumbledore when Daphne grabbed him.

"Not now. You're angry." She inflected the emotion to remind him of the Weasley's and the situation that happened with them. Nodding, he gave her a small smile and turned back to head into the infirmary and his oldest friend.

.oOo.

11 September 1996 Monday

Traffic in the infirmary was light, so some of the six visitors all slept on Madam Pomfrey's extra beds for the evening. Some did not sleep, but rather sat and waited. Daphne woke as the sun shone in the ward, and saw the Grangers still at their vigil next to Hermione's bed.

She felt sorrow for them as she watched her relatively new friend Hermione. Harry had been distraught at her injury, but the Grangers had been beside themselves. That thought brought up the discussion they'd had shortly after being married. Children.

The thought made her warm all over. At the same time, she was seeing a side affect right in front of her. It's not all fun and games. They probably haven't slept all night and are hanging on a thread waiting for a twitch of her hand or a stutter of breath.

"Ow."

Hermione's waking word set off a chain reaction through the ward. Richard and Alice almost came unhinged with finely meshed worry and joy. Harry woke and bounded to his friend's bed, Daphne right behind him. Susan had to poke Neville awake, and they eased up behind the group.

Madam Pomfrey moved through the crowd as an unblockable force. With her customary kindly brusqueness, she pronounced Hermione fit. "We shall need to do some tests later this afternoon to determine how much, if any, loss of function you will experience."

Hermione had been silent during all this, focusing on Madam Pomfrey like a lifeline. Suddenly, she burst out, "Terry's dead isn't he?"

Everyone's face fell. Alice gently took her daughter's hand in her own and Richard caressed her shoulder. This answered the question for her as Madam Pomfrey answered very gently, "I'm afraid so."

Hesitantly, Hermione nodded in understanding, and then her expression hitched. Alice pulled her into a hug and Hermione let forth a wail. Harry moved to the other side of the bed, Daphne at his shoulder.

A few minutes later, her tears dried up and she sat back on the bed, wiping her face with her hand. She gave a half-hearted smile to her friends to let them know she was getting control of herself. "Thanks for coming, guys."

Murmurs of "No problem," "Not at all," and so forth preceded Harry leaning in and asking, "How are you feeling?"

"Sore. Feels like a horse kicked me in the hip."

Daphne leaned over Harry's shoulder and said, "I'm sorry about Terry."

Hermione's face screwed up a little and she nodded. "He was nice. We'd patrolled quite a bit last year and we shared Runes and Arithmancy together. He was a friend."

At this point, Professor McGonagall entered the ward to check on her injured Lion. Harry and Daphne intercepted her en route to Hermione's bed. Before they could say anything, Minerva raised her hands in a placating manner and said, "The Aurors were called last night and a detective team has been investigating. A school wide wand-check has started. Mr. Malfoy has been taken into custody and charged with the casting of the Killing curse, murder and attempted murder. They have not found the caster of the Cutting curse that injured Miss Granger."

Harry shook his head, his face reddening with anger. Daphne was more incredulous, "He didn't clear his wand? I knew he was stupid, but really!"



McGonagall shook her head and said, "By definition, criminals are stupid."

Acknowledging the maxim with a nod, Daphne asked the question for her husband, "Is the Headmaster in hot water for not summoning the Aurors immediately?"

Raising her eyebrows, McGonagall asked, "What do you think?"

"I think he wormed his way out of being appropriately reprimanded for his criminal behavior. Again."

"You would be correct. Now, I must see to my Lion," and she gave the Potters a friendly nod before moving to Hermione's bedside.

Again, Harry made to leave the ward and have a 'discussion' with the Headmaster. Daphne merely placed her hand on his arm and shook her head. He exhaled loudly and with a grim expression, nodded in concurrence.

.oOo.

Before lunch, Daphne and Harry headed back to Rowan Hill. Richard had given Harry the key to their house. After a brief meal, they were going to fetch a few days worth of clothes and other items to get the Grangers through their stay in Scotland.

As they headed out of the ward, Daphne heard Hermione say, "Mum, Dad, I want to leave school."

With a start, Daphne looked to Harry. Judging by the worried expression on his face, he heard Hermione's words as well.

Two quick showers and a sandwich apiece provided Harry and Daphne a recharge and they apparated to the Granger's back garden.

Ten minutes later, they were headed back to Hogwarts with two overnight bags shrunk and in their pockets.

Richard and Alice excused themselves to use the shower facilities in the infirmary allowing the Potters some time with their friend. Harry took Hermione's hand and in a soft voice, asked, "Do you really want to leave?"

Hermione exhaled huffily and asked, "You heard that did you?" At Harry's silent waiting, her face fell and she half sobbed, "Yes."

Daphne embraced Hermione who hugged back fiercely. Lady Potter murmured words of encouragement and support to her friend. When she finally composed herself, Hermione gave Daphne a squeeze and a watery smile in thanks. "I think I should finish my education similar to you four," she indicated the four friends. "I won't ever feel safe here again. Every other time I've been attacked or hurt here was by a magical beast in an extraordinary situation. Troll, Basilisk and Dementor, but now..." she trailed off. "It was a student while I was just walking about. How am I ever to feel safe here now? Oh, the teeth thing in Fourth year doesn't count," she said pre-empting Harry's objection.

He looked down and said, "You're more than welcome to join our study sessions. We've got Bill Weasley helping now with Runes and Artimancy."

"I'd like that, thanks."

Daphne squeezed her hand as Susan asked, "What about your parents?"

In a rather uncharacteristic fashion, Hermione snorted loudly in derision of the idea that her parents may object. "My father almost danced a jig when I told them I wanted to leave here. It won't be a problem. I'll stay at home and use the Floo to hop to your place every

day for lessons." She paused, an uncertain expression flitting across her features. "If that's Ok?"

It was Harry's turn and he waved her off without a look. Daphne answered verbally. "Completely acceptable."

Susan and Neville left shortly afterward so as to check on Lady Augusta. She'd awakened early Sunday morning and Neville said she'd been in unusually good spirits. They had decided to tell Lady Augusta that he and Susan were officially dating. Hopefully, the good news would help with her recovery.

Harry and Daphne went home for a quick dinner and then used the Floo to head over to St. Mungo's to visit the Dowager Lady Longbottom. Daphne had to smile at herself. She'd become quite fond of the sometimes pompous older lady.

Harry hopped in the fireplace first, followed by his wife. As Daphne exited the fireplace at the hospital, she was alarmed to see Harry holding another woman in his arms. She walked across the entryway and saw that the 'other woman' was Tonks. Daphne paused, hearing murmurs from the fun-loving metamorph into Harry's shoulder.

"They got my Dad, Harry. The fuckers got my Dad."

Daphne's heart fell into her feet. Would the bad news never end? Her father, Lady Augusta, Hermione and now Ted Tonks. She approached the two and wrapped her arms around her family. The whole group shook in time with Tonks' sobs. Involuntarily, Daphne felt tears build in her own eyes.

All other thought was banished as Harry began screaming and fell to the ground, clutching his forehead. Things got much worse.

.oOo.

Tonks was between the Potters when Harry fell to the floor. Writhing in pain, he screamed as he fought the Legilimency attack from Voldemort. There was a different timbre to his screams this time. There was defiance alongside pain. Daphne could tell that he was throwing all he could into his fledgling Occlumency defenses.

Roughly pushing Tonks out of the way, Daphne tried to get to Harry's side in an attempt to help him. If the unintentional Legilimency worked last time, it might work again.

To Daphne's horror, a Healer Stunned Harry, silencing him. The Potters had discussed with Duncan Davis whether Stunning Harry was a good defense against the long-range Legilimency attack from Voldemort. The old man had been very vigorous in informing the Potters that Stunning Harry was tantamount to offering him up as a sacrifice to Voldemort.

"He will be unable to defend himself and the Enemy will be able to have his way with Lord Potter's psyche. No, incapacitation via spell or potion is most unwise. Better to fight back with all the meager defenses one can muster than to lie still, waiting for the slaughter."

With a growl of rage, Daphne cast the Reviving spell. She bent over Harry in an attempt to see in his eyes when she heard a spell being reflected off a shield behind her. Glancing back, she saw a tear stained Tonks standing guard over her and Harry, an Advanced Shield spell glowing bronze over the both of them.

The healer who had Stunned Harry was looking on in a mixture of consternation and frustration. Dismissing him as irrelevant for now, she turned back to Harry and spat, "Tonks keep them off me."

Not hearing a response, nor really caring, Daphne looked into her husband's eyes and tried to project her feelings of love, caring, protectiveness, respect and her deep abiding passion that had so quickly manifested in their relationship.

Like a lifeline to a sinking man, Harry visibly held on to the emotions she sent to him and fought back against the lipless bastard assaulting him. His brow furrowed and his eyes narrowed in concentration. His outline shimmered briefly and Daphne thought he might involuntarily Shift to The Tiger. He did not, but obviously redoubled his efforts.

Daphne stared into his eyes, doing what she could to help her love. Harry had stopped screaming and the entire entryway had stilled, watching the mental battle that was taking place. Finally, Harry relaxed, his entire body going limp. He closed his eyes and relaxed into Daphne's subsequent embrace.

They both looked around and blinked owlshly at the still glowing shield surrounding the Potters and Tonks. "Alright there Harry?" the Auror asked.

He nodded weakly and said, "I will be. Thanks for the help Tonks."

She nodded and her fierce visage melted into that of a vulnerable young woman. A young woman who wanted her Father to give her a hug and he never would again. Slowly, Harry took her in his arms and together, they approached the front desk to find out where Andromeda was being treated.

As if in a dream, Tonks related to Harry and Daphne, "They were at home – having dinner, you know? I was going to swing by and tell them about Remus and me. Full moon is tomorrow and he isn't really up to snuff tonight. I just wanted to lay some groundwork, you know?"

Daphne nodded and pulled the young woman close while a healer approached Harry, wand out but pointed at the floor. The healer was evidently trying to check over her husband and he was politely refusing treatment. Shortly, he moved to discover Andromeda's location.

"I was running late, and when I did get there, the fuckers had just left. Dad was..." Tonks choked a sob and covered her mouth. Composing herself, she continued, "Dad was dead. Probably the Killing curse. Mum was pretty torn up. Looked like a bunch of Cutting curses and some Bludgeoners." Her voice trailed off to a whisper, "Her hands were pretty mangled."

Daphne pulled the Auror close as Harry walked up. "Fourth floor, room 413," he sighed in an exhausted voice. Some of the battered remnants of the Black family moved to the lift to visit one of their own.

A/N

1. I own nothing
2. Thanks to all who have reviewed, it is wonderful to those of us (ME) who are into instant gratification! Thanks again.
3. The Deez are pushing back. They don't know Harry et al raided the Nott estate, but they do know of his participation at the DoM and the killing of Bellatrix and Rudolphus plus his role in the 'Mot.
4. Dumbledore is a hot button in any of my fics. He had such a central role in Harry's life that once the manipulations come out he can't help but become a lightning rod for any and all of Harry's actions. For a while, I can see Harry acting out of pure spite and trying to thwart the man at all turns even if it was counterproductive to the downfall of Voldemort (unless Hermione or Daphne were there to calm him). I am trying to remove his character from the story as much as I can in order to let the Potters live and act without the polarizing influence of the MoB. He's still there, playing around the edges, though. There will be a confrontation in the future, but he isn't a 'player' in this story. Neither is the OOTP. Then again, that organization didn't really do anything in canon either.

## Chapter 11

12 September 1996 Tuesday

Daphne was in the Wizengamot private observers' gallery fidgeting with her robes. They were brand new, very stylish and she was getting used to the fit. She had to smile remembering Harry's face when he first saw them on her. They'd almost been late for the convocation.

For once, the friends had no new business to introduce. Today the Ministry was to report their findings regarding the circumstances surrounding the taking of the Dark Mark. Unofficially, Amelia had verbally briefed all eight of the Fifteen in an afternoon meeting the previous day. Harry had related it all and even shown her the pensieve memory. He had been laughing so hard, he said that she had to see the facial expressions herself.

Amelia had welcomed them as they arrived. Harry, Neville and Susan had arrived right after Richard MacMillan and struck up a conversation with the affable Scot. Boot arrived shortly thereafter, all stuff and nonsense. He paused when Amelia offered her hand in welcome before accepting it with a miniscule grip. Daphne could tell by the faint flush on Amelia's face, the intentional snub had been noticed.

Jones and Abbott arrived together rounding out the members. Connie Hammer was sitting in a chair to the left of Amelia's desk and a small team of individuals sat in the back; file folders and ancient texts at the ready.

"My Lords and my Lady" Amelia began, "Thank you for coming at short notice. I wanted to brief you key individuals about the response the Government has formulated in response to my Lord Potter's request concerning the Dark Mark." All the Fifteen nodded gravely in understanding. If Amelia was pre-briefing them, the news was going

to be momentous.

"Our outstanding team," Amelia here indicated to the three witches and one wizard in the back, "has done an outstanding job of reviewing existing research and even conducting new research on the prisoners in Azkaban that are marked during the last month."

Amelia gave the team a congratulatory nod and then paused, gathering her thoughts. Tapping a quill on her desk, she continued, "The short of it is that the Dark Mark can only be taken by a willing and loyal supporter of Lord Voldemort."

Daphne had been surprised when only Boot shuddered at the hated anagram. Even Jones had stoically endured the name when he had shuddered in the Wizengamot chamber. In fact, he spoke first, "Minister, is the Government going to act on this knowledge and introduce legislation tomorrow? Perhaps legislation that makes it an imprisonable offense to be branded with the Dark Mark?"

The other seven of the Fifteen silently regarded the Minister as she sat silently. "Yes, that is exactly what the Government is going to do. Ten years minimum, life is maximum depending on other infractions."

Daphne saw five of the Fifteen, including Harry and Neville, raise their eyebrows at Amelia's declaration. "Pretty stiff, Minister" said Abbott.

"My Lord, any of these reprobate cretins that have allowed them to be branded like cattle by Lord Voldemort have to at least kill or rape a person in front of their Master. On top of this, they have to accomplish successfully at least three missions their monstrous leader assigns them. Usually these are sadistic missions where torture is the primary pastime. Now tell me how ten years is 'Pretty stiff'?"



Quietly, MacMillan asked, "How do you know this?"

"This part of our team's research is on a more shaky ground. Not because of any fault of their own, but because it's based on testimony of captured Death Eaters. We currently have twenty-seven marked Death Eaters and of those, twenty have testified that their 'initiation' was as I described. Four described much worse than I did and the other three much less. We believe the three were let off easy because they were extraordinarily wealthy and Voldemort didn't want to scare them away."

Harry finally spoke up and said, "Still, those are pretty solid numbers."

Amelia nodded in concurrence. Regarding all present, she asked, "I would like your support in the debate tomorrow that is sure to be spirited."

Jones snorted, "Spirited she says."

Amelia gave him a small smile and an inclination of her head. There was a long moment of silence before Harry spoke up.

"I am not of a legalistic bent, nor do I have the experience that our more long term members have," he inclined his head at Jones and Boot. "But this is a matter of right and wrong. My only consideration is that of a truly repentant Death Eater." Harry shook his head as if to clear it from cobwebs and continued.

"When caught, most Death Eaters would sell their mother's soul to stay out of Azkaban. However, what if there is one out there who truly is repentant?"

He paused and took a deep breath, "I am reminded of the case of my godfather, Sirius Black." The older members looked at him quizzically, yet he pressed on, "He was sent to prison without a trial which would

have exonerated him of any and all charges. He was truly innocent. How do we provide a process which will prevent a similar situation from occurring?"

Glancing around at the other members, he had to hold his breath to keep from laughing. Jones looked at Harry as if he was mentally deficient while Boot obviously smelled something quite foul that no one else could detect.

Amelia nodded in concurrence, "You bring up an excellent point, my Lord. Part of the bill the Government will introduce will include a Veritaserum questioning on the current loyalties of the marked person under consideration. This should address your concerns." Harry exhaled, relief evident on his face. He nodded, letting Amelia know she had his support.

Next to him, Neville had been looking at his hands, mulling over the discussion. Even in the memory, Daphne could tell that he was still feeling guilty about his rampage at the Speckled Basilisk. Looking up at the Minister, he nodded his support. Next to him, Susan gave her Aunt a small smile.

Jones cleared his throat and said, "Minister, part of me dislikes this idea immensely. However, the practical side of me overrides my reservations. House Jones will support the debate and the subsequent vote."

MacMillan and Abbott gave resigned nods while Boot sat silent. Realizing he was the only person not to indicate the status of his support, he waved his hand airily and said in an offhand tone, "I suppose. Boot will support."

Amelia nodded to them all and said, "Thank you my Lords, my Lady. I will not request a vote immediately and force you to push through the vote. I'd like to win over the Wizengamot through the debate." At some of the disbelieving expressions she added, "Well, some

persons that are open minded enough to be won over through debate. We all know that some of our members will never support this idea."

.oOo.

Now the doors were closing on the Wizengamot chamber and the official response was to be given. Dumbledore went through the motions of calling the body to order and making the call for old business.

Amelia rose from the Government bench and addressed Dumbledore, "Chief Warlock, the Government owes a response to my Lord Potter regarding the Dark Mark."

"Very well, does the Government have a response prepared?"

"Yes, we do."

"Very well," and he sat, yielding the floor to Amelia.

Amelia rose and flicked her wand, causing bound documents to appear on each members desk. "My Lord Potter," she said in address to Harry. He rose in response and she continued, "Pursuant to your request of 15 August, the Government has prepared this response."

"Many thanks, Madam Minister," Harry replied before sitting.

Daphne scanned the crowd, as the rustle of parchment was the only thing heard for many minutes. Many were seriously contemplating what was being read while others haphazardly read it. There was the occasional oath interspersed with "My word!"

Finally, Triton Nott bounded to his feet and without being recognized by the Chief Warlock, boomed out, "What is this crap!? It is common

knowledge that many of our finest were unwilling servants of the Dark Lord! Now these mental deficients in the Ministry are trying to assert that only a willing person can have the Mark? Be gone with this!" He sat down with an air of finality and dissmissiveness.

Amelia had been expecting this response and Daphne had to actively suppress a laugh when the Minister calmly ignored the man and scanned the crowd for more questions. Nott began spluttering in outrage when his commands were not immediately carried out.

Harry stood with his preplanned question, "Thank you for this extensive response, Madam Minister. I must wonder how confident the Government is regarding the magic underlying these conclusions," here he indicated the report.

Amelia nodded in understanding and answered, "Appendix Two fully details the magic involved. Everything is present bar the actual wand movements and the incantation. Those are also known and if any member wants to review these, we can schedule a time for that to be discussed with the research team. Those items have been deemed not suitable for public consumption."

Thus began a lively and sometimes heated debate. After three hours, in which each member of the Fifteen rose at various times to support the Minister's proposed law, debate closed and the law passed, 8-0, 180-169.

.oOo.

"The bad guys are going to go nuts over this."

Harry only nodded in response. They'd discussed the probable Death Eater response with Amelia and while none could pin down exact actions, all agreed Voldemort would not take the outlawing of his group very well.

Harry had just changed out of his fancy Wizengamot robes and they were going to meet with Remus and Tonks for a four-person melee round. Neville and Susan were visiting Lady Augusta. The Healers had been hopeful that she'd be able to return home to Green Hills today.

"How is Tonks doing?" Harry asked.

Daphne shook her head ruefully. "Not so good. We chatted some when they came over yesterday for the Full Moon Run with Remus. She was oscillating between anger and grief. Remus is the one holding her together; right now she's a bit of a mess."

Harry nodded and headed for the door, Daphne trailing. They paused at the side door leading to the melee ring. In the distance were Remus and Tonks obviously talking even though the Potters couldn't hear what they were saying. Tonks was obviously upset, her hair was shifting color like ripples of water. Even her facial features were altering slightly in her agitated mood.

Suddenly, Tonks threw her hands in the air in obvious anger. Her face darkened and even at the distance, they could hear her voice. Daphne's heart fell when she could only make out one word from their friend, "WHY!? WHY!?"

Remus stood there, letting her purge the poison out of her system. The tears were coursing down Tonks' face as she ranted and screamed her rage and grief. Finally, she fell to her knees, her body wracked with sobs. Now Remus slowly and firmly embraced her, whispering comforting words and slightly rocking her.

Daphne leaned on Harry, indescribably sad. "I envy her, you know."

Harry looked at her questioningly. She smiled ruefully in return, "She loves her father deeply and he obviously loved her in return. My father died and it didn't even faze me."

Daphne shook her head, disappointed in herself. "I know he did everything in his power to drive me away, but on some level I still feel that if I had been a better person, a better daughter then I would have truly loved my father and been loved in return." She shrugged at the illogical mess that was her feelings.

Harry pulled her into his arms. He was silent for a long time and she pulled strength from his presence. Finally, he whispered, "I love you more than my own life. You are the best person I've ever known, bar none."

Her heart lifted at his words and she thanked the gods once again for giving her Harry to love and be loved by.

Their impromptu cuddle was interrupted by the stalking form of Tonks coming up the path from the melee ring. Without thinking, Harry stepped in front of Daphne and they both drew their wands. Remus was hurrying to catch up to his new girlfriend when she pulled up in front of Harry.

"I know you're in on these latest Death Eater raids, Harry. I want in."

Daphne relaxed a bit, but did not holster her wand. Harry crooked his eyebrow and said, "Why do you think I'm in on them?"

Tonks scowled and spat, "Don't play games with me, Harry. I want in."

"You're already an Auror."

She shook her head in derision, "I'm so tied up by rules and regulations I have to request in triplicate if I want to use the crapper. I want in."

Harry looked at her with an evaluating expression, "I'll get back to

you."

"When?"

Now he was a bit exasperated and with a hint of impatience said, "When I want to Nymphadora. Now are we going to melee today or what?"

Remus gave the others a short nod and led them out to the pit, a thoughtful expression playing across his worn features.

.oOo.

15 September 1996 Friday

Harry and Daphne walked up the front lawn of Hogwarts, heading up to the Hospital Wing. Nodding to a few acquaintances here and there, Daphne felt like a visitor at her old school. It was a distinctly odd feeling as by all rights, she should be a Sixth year this year. Oh, how her life had changed on June 30th.

When crossing the Entry Hall, the Potters ran across none other than Draco Malfoy and his little gang of groupies. Malfoy called out, "Look, it's the half-blood scarhead and his whore!"

Less than a second later, the idiot was unconscious and bleeding on the stones of the hall due to a well aimed Bludgeoning hex. Harry stalked over to the inbred moron and after a quick flick of his wand, levitated the boy in front of him.

"Ennervate."

Malfoy's eyes blinked open and he was obviously about to mutter, "What happened?" when Harry slapped him across the face with the back of his left hand. Hard.

The blond Slytherin's head rocked back and when he gathered control of his faculties he saw an enraged yet somewhat controlled Harry Potter in front of him.

"You have insulted me and my wife; I hereby invoke the Code Duello and challenge you to a duel to the death. Are you sixteen years of age?"

Dumbly, Malfoy nodded.

Daphne had to put everything into controlling her expression in order to refrain from bursting into laughter. No matter what, Harry would not allow the duel to occur. He had learned quite a bit from his inappropriate encounter with Arthur Weasley. However, the stupid wanking ferret didn't know that. He was being made an object lesson for the underage potential Death Eater crowd: Do Not Fuck With Harry Potter Or He Will Kill You.

Harry waited and with an exasperated air finally asked, "Do you accept the death duel or will you offer an apology?"

Malfoy's face twisted into a sneer and he spat, "I'll never apologize to you, trash!"

Harry slapped him again, a little more knuckle in the blow this time. Now the Malfoy scion was bleeding freely from his nose and lip.

Malfoy looked Harry in the eye and something he saw there scared him. Looking at the ground, the blond teen began to tremble and when Harry repeated his question, the magic rolling off the Potter Lord caused all standing nearby to recoil in surprise and fear. The suspended young Slytherin lost control of his bladder.

By now, the entry hall was completely quiet and there were two or three dozen students watching with baited breath.



Harry took a deep breath and tried to control himself. Daphne placed a hand on his arm and he used her touch like a lifeline, pulling himself to safety. Draco solved all their problems by shaking his head while looking at the floor and muttering, "I apologize."

"Very well. I thank you and bid you good day," Harry canceled the Levitation charm and then stalked off toward the Hospital Wing.

Daphne stood there for a moment, eyeing her former housemates. Her expression was closed and cold. Pansy Parkinson and Theodore Nott flinched back at her expression while the Troll brothers, Goyle and Crabbe, wouldn't meet her eyes. Malfoy was shuffling away toward the dungeons to change his clothes. He too hid his eyes from her. Satisfied that they all were sufficiently cowed, Daphne turned and moved to catch up with her husband.

.oOo.

Hermione stared with her mouth agape as Daphne finished describing the confrontation in the Entry Hall. Harry was sitting next to his wife, examining the texture of the fabric in his sleeve most assiduously.

Hermione reacted exactly how Harry expected, which was why he was trying to hide in plain sight.

"Harry! I can't believe you did that!" she shrieked at her friend. This was followed by intermittent wacks on the shoulder that had him flinching. Her verbal and physical violence tapered off to the occasional grumble and vague hand gestures. At the end, Daphne was sure that Hermione was praying to all the Saints and Martyrs for strength and forbearance with fools and men. Or was that redundant?

After one last half-hearted glare at Harry, she said, "Madam Pomfrey is letting me out of here tomorrow, could you please pick me up and

help me get home?" She had started her statement off in her usual deliberate, confident style, but by the end, her eyes were shining and her voice was like that of a lost little girl.

Daphne reached out and took her hand. It was much more real for Hermione now, leaving Hogwarts that is. Daphne did not revere education as Hermione did, but leaving school hadn't been easy for her and she had Harry for support as well. Hermione leaving school was going to be rough on her.

"I feel so lost," the bushy-haired witch whispered.

Harry leaned forward, an intense expression on his face, "You'll always have us. Always." Taking her other hand he gave her a squeeze as Hermione held back tears with a watery smile and a nod of thanks.

After a moment to collect herself, Hermione nodded her thanks and said, "When I get home, I'll get back to Scrying again. Obviously, I haven't had much private time here."

Harry nodded and asked, "Do you want to join our daily lessons?"

"I'd like that. Monday?"

"Monday it is."

.oOo.

28 September 1996 Thursday

The four friends had a relatively quiet two weeks; training, a dinner party at the MacMillan's home and moving Andromeda and Nymphadora Tonks into the newly refurbished and warded Black Manor.

There had been little fight when Harry had suggested the move. Andromeda looked at him with blank eyes and only said, "Thank you my Lord. I am most sensible of your generosity."

Tonks had red eyes from the discussion and had patted her mum on the back before starting to make a list for the move.

In the awkward silence, Harry had looked at Daphne, bewildered on what to do. Daphne just hooked her arm in his and made their goodbyes. Strolling down the suburban street in Brighton, they'd walked a good mile in the pleasant weather in silence.

Finally, he asked, "What more should I have done?"

Daphne sighed, "You couldn't have done anything more. Andromeda and Tonks just have to heal. You can't fix them. Your support and offer of the Manor is more than enough."

Snuggling into his side, she continued, "Tonks has Remus and us to lean on. Andromeda has her daughter and her friends from work. We're the Lord and Lady of the family to Andromeda, not her consolers. I don't think she wants that from us."

Harry frowned and then shook his head. "I wish I could do more for them."

Daphne gave a sad smile, "Don't ever change my Love."

.oOo.

The two weeks since Hermione had left Hogwarts moved past in a rush. Due to her hip, Hermione had to stay out of the duels and obstacle courses that Young and Dubois seemed to love, but otherwise, she was in her element. The bit of depression at leaving Hogwarts was more than overcome with her new learning environment.

"I'm learning in a small group, at an accelerated rate, and don't have to worry about bullies and such. I'm in heaven!" she had jokingly shouted at lunch on Friday.

There had been no success on the Scrying efforts, but Hermione had made one discovery; locations are warded from Scrying, not persons.

"Since the Death Eaters are usually most active at night, I'll try Scrying for them then, maybe catch a break and see a raid forming or in progress that can be broken up."

That's exactly what happened on the 28th of September.

The four friends were sitting on the veranda with Amelia, sipping lemonade and chatting about travels they either had accomplished, or wanted to take in the near future. Evelyn was spending the weekend with George Stebbins and Phillip was at his Grandmother's home.

Neville was outlining an expedition into equatorial Africa he wanted to undertake when Hermione came bursting out the doors of the house in her dressing gown that was liberally covered in soot from the Floo.

"HARRY!"

She looked at the shocked group and found her dark haired target. "Death Eaters at the MacMillan's house!"

The friends stood and Transfigured their clothes into the black long sleeve T-shirts, cargo pants and boots they usually wore on their 'expeditions'. As the ladies were charming their hair into tight plaits, Harry turned to the rising Amelia and asked, "Backup?"

"Within minutes," and she hustled into the house.

When everyone was ready, they drew their wands and Harry said, "Apparate into the front entry hall, assume it's a hot landing zone. No prisoners."

The other three nodded absently and with a series of pops and one silent apparition, Hermione was left on the veranda alone.

"Godspeed you all home my friends," and she sat down to wait for them to return.

.oOo.

The four friends arrived in the front hall of Thistledown, the home of Baron and Baroness MacMillan, in a roughly square formation; Harry and Susan were facing into the house when he called out.

"Down!"

Three swaths of eldritch fire swept overhead, mixing green, purple and scarlet. From her knees, Daphne saw four Death Eaters down the hall. With a grim smile, she began working her wand as Harry and Susan unleashed a barrage of high power Bone Breakers, Cutting curses and a few Decapitation curses for good measure. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Neville doing the same as her and with a final flourish, watched the results.

Her conjured lion sprang on a Death Eater, knocking off his head with one swipe of his massive paw. Laughing to herself at the irony, she saw Neville's conjured Anaconda pin two Death Eaters together and begin its slow, inexorable, crushing death grip.

The last Death Eater, distracted by the mauling lion, was promptly cut in half by an overpowered Cutting curse from Susan.

"Come on," Harry ordered. Pointing to Neville and Susan, he then indicated the stairs.

Nodding, Neville and Susan sprinted up to the first floor.

Daphne put her hand on Harry's arm, causing him to pause for a moment. She quickly cast Compulsion charms on the conjured lion and snake. The compulsions would cause the predators to hunt anyone wearing the white bone mask of the Death Eaters.

"I don't know how long they'll last, but it sure can't hurt."

After Daphne cast a quick Human Revealing charm, Harry headed toward the grand Drawing Room where they'd been entertained not too long ago. Daphne was scanning up and down, occasionally turning around to ensure no one was coming up from behind.

Harry paused at the door to the Drawing Room and looked at her. She nodded to him that she was ready. He held up his finger, One, Two, Three...

They sprinted through the double doorway and found five Death Eaters standing over the MacMillan's and four others.

Without thinking, they both began casting. The long pink Ribbon Cutting curse left Daphne's wand as she saw a spread of five Bone Breaking curses leave Harry's wand.

The whirl and fury of battle descended and time became a variable. Some times actions were impossibly fast. When she followed up her shielded Ribbon Cutter with a raking Fire Whip that decapitated one of their foes, she knew she was moving faster than her opponents could possible react.

Other times, time slowed to a crawl. She saw two of Harry's Bone Breakers strike home. Unfortunately, they both impacted on the arms

of two Death Eaters. Before she could react, three Death Eaters called out "Avada Kedavra!" and the sickly green spell sped across the room toward Harry.

Shrieking now, Daphne Transfigured a chair into a brick wall that was shattered by her opponent with a series of Reductor curses. With quick wand work, the shards became railroad spikes. Grunting with the effort, she banished the spikes at her opponent and followed it up with an overcharged Reductor, exploding the pierced man into jelly.

Turning to Harry, she saw him rolling out from behind a partially shattered marble shield he'd conjured. Narrowing her eyes, she raised her wand and intentionally brought all the magic she could summon to her wand tip.

"Incendio."

Flames hot enough to rival Fiendfyre erupted from her wand and sped toward one of the remaining Death Eaters. His broken arm hanging loosely, he tried to shield, but wasn't fast enough. The bluish white flames washed over him and a moment later, he was gone. Burnt to ash.

She began to shake at the expenditure of so much magic in so short a time and fell to her knees. Black clad legs stood in front of her and she saw her Harry standing over her as he cast spell after spell at the remaining Death Eaters.

Thus began one of the most amazing duels she had ever seen. When Harry and Flitwick had gone toe to toe in the dueling pit, it was usually a good show.

That was nothing compared to this.

Before Daphne could even breath once, Harry had ripped off a pair of Reductors at the opponent on his left. Despite shielding, the Death

Eater was thrown in the air and back five feet.

Without pausing, Harry spun to his right and dove to the ground, letting a dark purple curse pass over his head. From the ground, he Transfigured the chair next to him into three bear traps and banished them at his opponent.

Not pausing to see the effect, he now conjured a pair of bludgers bound together by chain and sent them at Death Eater number two. For good measure, he repeated the process just as his now standing opponent number one reminded Daphne's husband of his presence via a Killing curse. Harry responded with another hastily conjured marble wall.

The bludgers impacted contestant number two, the chains wrapping around the man and incapacitating him for a short while. The man had lost the use of his left arm, as it had been removed just below the elbow by one of Harry's bear traps. Harry cast Daphne's favorite Ribbon Cutting curse at contestant number one, which shattered his shield and cut open the man's chest.

Snarling, Death Eater number one let loose with a fusillade of dark curses that were aimed low – at Daphne who was on her hands and knees behind Harry. He shielded often, as he had to protect his wife. By now, Death Eater number one had Vanished the binding chain and rejoined the fight, the last mistake he would ever make.

She could tell the other two were attacking him with all they had, thinking they had the boy-who-lived on the ropes. Harry grunted as he picked up the pace with his spellcasting to the point that his hand was a blur.

The Death Eaters were shielding at this point and too afraid to try to dodge. They were probably thinking they might move out of the protective range of their shields. They were right.



Harry snarled as the bloodlust rose in his head like the heady feeling of wine. Daphne saw the rug he was standing on begin to smolder. The raw energy he was loosing from his body through his spellcasting was heating the room and there was a shimmering haze around his lean frame.

With a growl, she tried to stand and help, but merely fell to the ground in her temporary weakness. As she lifted her head, Daphne saw something that made her smile.

The conjured lion leapt at the Death Eater on Harry's left, bearing him to the ground. Screaming, the Death Eater was torn to shreds before the lion could fix upon his throat and with one quick shake, break the man's neck.

The remaining Death Eater paused, either taken aback by the lion attack on his compatriot or the efficient reduction in his fellows. Possibly, it was because he was bleeding badly from the stump of his left arm. No matter what, the man didn't even blink when Harry leapt at him, Shifting in mid air. The Tiger copied the conjured lion and bore the remaining Death Eater to the floor. With a growl, The Tiger ripped out the man's throat.

Not looking back, The Tiger turned toward Daphne and Shifted back to her husband. She nodded to him and gave him a half smile that she was Ok. "I just need a minute. Check on them," and she indicated the six people on the floor.

Harry was walking over to the incapacitated MacMillans as the front doors to the house were shattered and the Auror response team boiled into the house. The Potters immediately sheathed their wands and put their hands in the air. Tonks had drilled into their heads that this was the only thing that would save them getting cursed to Timbuktu and back when Aurors came charging to the rescue.

"Aurors! Hands in the air!" four of the red robed law enforcement

officers ran in the room.

"They're hurt," Daphne said without preamble. She pointed to the six people on the floor. The Auror with the white stripes on his sleeves ran over to the MacMillans, reaching into his robes for a large bag as he did so.

The lead Auror for this team was a familiar person. Tonks motioned to Harry and Daphne and when they got close, she asked, "Neville and Susan here too?"

Daphne nodded and looked at the ceiling. Tonks held a round metal disk to her mouth and said, "Atkinson, we have two friendlies on the first floor. They'll be wearing black trousers and black shirts."

She heard a murmuring voice from the disk and Tonks nodded to herself. "Right, then. While everyone else is sweeping the house and grounds, why don't you two tell me what the what is?"

"Well, we were at home with Amelia, Susan and Neville when Hermione came out on the veranda shouting that Death Eaters were here. Amelia ran inside to call for you all..."

"Tonks, you need to see this," interrupted an Auror who was tallying up the dead Death Eaters. The three ambled over and looked down at the last Death Eater that Harry had dispatched as The Tiger.

"Aw, shit," muttered Tonks. "Dumbledore is going to be pissed."

It was the bloody and surprised face of Severus Snape.

.oOo.

They had given complete depositions to a junior Auror for the last fifteen minutes. Thistledown was a hive of law enforcement officers and healers.

In the background, they heard the fireplace roar five times in quick succession. Two more emergency Auror healers entered the room, and Daphne could only assume the other three went upstairs. The MacMillans and their guests had been Portkeyed to the hospital soon after the Aurors had arrived. Apparently, the Cruciatus had been used quite liberally.

"Have you seen Neville or Susan?" she asked Harry.

Pursing his lips in concern, he shook his head. "Let's go find them."

They headed to the stairs where they found Tonks talking to the overall Response Team Lead. They broke up their impromptu meeting and Harry tugged on Tonks' sleeve, getting her attention.

"Susan and Neville?"

Tonks grimaced and bands of ice gripped Daphne's heart. "They took down seven Eaters before Susan got hit with a nasty Cutter in the shoulder up into her neck. She was bleeding pretty badly so they Portkeyed her to St. Mungo's. I think Neville apparated away after her."

"Fuck," Harry muttered under his breath. Daphne covered her face with her hands, trying to maintain her composure.

"The emergency healer said he thought she'd be Ok, but he wanted her in the hospital."

Daphne nodded and grabbed Harry's arm, pulling him toward the Entry Hall to apparate away. "Thanks Tonks. We're going to go to the hospital. If you need us, you can get us there. Otherwise, we'll see you tomorrow."

As they walked away, Harry stopped and turned back to Tonks. He

looked her dead in the eye and said, "We definitely need to talk tomorrow. Is Remus in?"

Tonks professional face slipped and a gleam of hatred shone in her eyes. "He's in. I only had to say three words to remind him why: James, Lily, Sirius."

Harry nodded and they made their way to St. Mungo's.

.oOo.

They found Susan in a VIP room with two burly Aurors standing guard outside the door. She was in the room next to Richard and Sarah MacMillan, which was also guarded. Baron and Baroness MacMillan had suffered the least under the Cruciatus curse of the six residents of Thistledown. Apparently, the Death Eaters wanted them to watch her family be tortured. Sadly, Sarah's mother had already been moved into the bed next to Frank and Alice Longbottom in the long-term spell damage ward.

Amelia, Neville and Lady Augusta were in the room where Susan slept. On either side of the Vicountess' bed sat Amelia and Lady Augusta while Neville just looked out the window into the night sky. The room was completely silent and no one moved when the Potters entered.

For a moment, Daphne could have sworn she heard Susan breathing in the stillness.

"How is she?" Daphne asked.

"She'll be fine. She's sleeping due to blood loss. Probably, she'll just have a nasty scar running from the top of her shoulder up the side of her neck to her ear," Neville responded without looking away from the window.

Daphne exhaled loudly in relief. Lady Augusta took Daphne's hand and gave her a squeeze while watching over the focus of her grandson's affections. Amelia didn't look up. Daphne conjured a chair and sat next to the older woman whom she was beginning to regard as a favored Aunt.

Harry went to Neville's side and put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "How you doing, mate?" he asked quietly.

Neville shrugged and gave Harry a lost look before shaking his head while the lost expression on his face mixed with despair. His shoulders slumped and the two young men just stood there staring into the night sky, looking for something. Exactly what, neither knew.

Daphne watched from her chair and her face hardened. She caught Amelia's eye and glared at her. The Minister flinched at the expression. She saw the results of the Ministry's neglect and lack of preparedness lying on the bed in front of her.

While facing her niece, Amelia said, "Harry, I'm taking the gloves off. Keep the Wizengamot off my back, as Connie and I are going to be busy."

Still looking out the window, Harry pulled his friend close in a one-armed hug and responded, "Not a problem Madam Minister."

.oOo.

29 September 1996 Friday

Susan came home to Rowan Hill mid-morning. The Healers wanted her to stay overnight for observation and all her tests had come back good in the morning. The MacMillans had a few more days, but when Harry and Daphne had stopped in to see them this morning, they'd been awake and lucid – if not a little sore still.

As Harry and Daphne moved to leave them, Richard caught Harry by the sleeve and said in a low voice, "I owe you our lives, Potter."

Harry smiled and replied, "Call me Harry."

Richard gave him a small relieved smile and said, "Harry, I can't thank you enough."

"I'm glad we could help." Harry paused, bent over and said in Richard's ear, "Phalanx Home Defense and Warders. Tell them you want the same setup as I've got. It's a steep price, but nigh on unbeatable."

MacMillan nodded as Harry leaned closer. "Amelia is taking the gloves off and needs some help with the Wizengamot. I'm sure you'd be willing to help us?"

Richard gave a feral smile. Harry nodded in return, gave him and Sarah a short wave before leaving the room to help Susan home.

.oOo.

As Susan settled on the couch in the Drawing Room, she sighed and let the sunlight play across her face. Without opening her eyes, she asked, "Is the Prophet foaming at the mouth today?"

"Yep," replied Daphne as she tossed the paper to her friend. Neville was seeing to his grandmother back at Green Hills while Harry attended to some correspondence from Gringotts.

Susan read the article that sensationally announced FIFTEEN ATTACKED BY DEATH EATERS and a smaller headline read BONES, MACMILLAN HURT.

"Well, I'm not in critical condition and neither were Richard or Sarah." She paused and then rested her head back on the seat, "Sarah's

poor mother."

Daphne sat next to her friend and handed her a cup of tea. Susan took a grateful sip and shook her head before she enquired, "I never asked Neville, but how is he reacting to what happened?"

Daphne shook her hand in a 'so-so' motion as she sipped her own tea. "He had a rough night. I don't think he spared a thought for the MacMillans until today; he was very worried about you. Harry stayed with him and they took a couple of walks, chatting and whatnot."

Susan nodded in relief. Another sip of tea and a solitary tear slipped down her cheek. Daphne set her tea on the tray and then gently took Susan's cup, transferring it to the table. Gently, Daphne took her friend in her arms asking, "Do you want to talk about it?"

After some sniffles, Susan sat up straight and said, "I was pretty scared last night. Neville was ...he was amazing. I just did what I could to stay alive." Daphne scowled internally. Susan was a phenomenal fighter who could stand toe to toe with any Death Eater in single combat. She had no cause to be running herself down.

"I saw his face when I got hit. He was so scared." She gestured toward the thick ropy scar on her neck, which disappeared, into her robes. "And now I'm disfigured."

Seeing the problem, Daphne scowled at her friend. "Susan, you are one of the most beautiful women I know. One measly scar isn't going to change that. Look at Harry. Isn't he one of the hottest guys you know and he has his scar?" She said the last with a smile on her face that Susan reluctantly returned.

"I know, it sounds vain of me, but I feel hideous now."

Daphne punched her friend on the shoulder, surprising Susan. "As your Auntie said, 'Build a bridge and get over yourself'." Softly

embracing her friend, Daphne continued, "I know it doesn't have the same impact coming from me as from Neville, but I still think you're a very beautiful woman. And no, I'm not gay."

Now Susan laughed aloud. "If there are any purely heterosexual women on the planet, it's you and me!"

Daphne giggled, her mission of breaking Susan out of her funk accomplished.

With a sigh and a smile, the young peers resumed their tea. As the clock struck ten, the fireplace roared twice in quick succession, followed by one more. Moments later, a perky Tonks chatting with Hermione and a subdued Remus Lupin strolled into the Drawing Room.

"Hey there Daphne, Susan."

The girls rose to greet the visitors. While Susan got a tender hug from Hermione, Daphne watched the now scarlet haired Auror. Tonks had her normal perky expression but underneath – around her eyes - was her grief. Fortunately, the manic look of vengeance that had haunted her on and off was not present today.

Harry ambled into the room, two letters in hand. "Ah, I thought I heard the Floo." He shook Remus' hand and got a hug from Tonks. Everyone settled down and Harry called, "Dobby."

The house elf popped in and waited expectantly. "Would you please pop over to Green Hills and tell Neville that Hermione, Remus and Tonks are here and we need him? Thank you."

Dobby bowed wordlessly and with a small pop, was gone.

They all chatted pleasantly, but there was a tension in the room that they all acknowledged yet ignored. Shortly, Neville strode in the room



and Harry said, "Good. Let's chat, shall we?"

Everyone settled in with their tea and waited. Harry sat for a minute in a contemplative silence, gathering his thoughts. Finally, he said, "What we're doing isn't helping."

Everyone, save Remus and Hermione, looked at Harry askance. Hermione nodded thoughtfully while Remus fidgeted with his teacup. Neville finally asked what was on everyone's mind, "Why in the world do you say that? We've taken down probably three dozen Death Eaters since we've started. No offense Tonks," he indicated toward the scarlet haired woman across from him, "But the Aurors can't claim anything close to that."

Harry nodded and held up his hand to get everyone's attention. "I agree, and let me clarify: We can kill Death Eaters all day, but Voldemort will only recruit more. They may not be as powerful or as skilled as Bellatrix, Rudolphus and other members of his inner circle, but he can get more. If we want to stop this, we need to kill Voldemort." Harry looked into his tea and continued sotto voce, "I need to kill Voldemort."

Remus started at the last, his keen werewolf hearing picking up on the statement. Eyes narrowing, he said to Harry, "Explain."

Daphne nodded her support to her husband and squeezed his hand. "Long story short, the reason the guards were outside the Department of Mysteries was to guard a prophecy that said that only I have the ability to kill Voldemort. There's a lot more said, but not really germane to the discussion."

Hermione, Tonks and Remus, the only two to whom the prophecy was news, sat back in their chairs, staring off into space as they digested the information. Tonks shook her head first and said jauntily, "Right. Important safety tip; leave the lipless, snake-faced bad guy to Harry. Anyone else is fair game."

Everyone chuckled at that and the moment of tension passed.

Susan piped up, her hand on her neck covering her scar, "So why aren't we helping?"

Harry rubbed his chin when Daphne's face cleared. "Anyone can kill or capture Death Eaters," she said while watching her husband. Harry looked at her with agreement and she continued, "Now that the Ministry is going on the offensive, we don't need to fill that role."

"We need to find and kill Voldemort," Remus finished in a low voice.

"Yes." Harry looked at his friends and continued, "I realize this isn't what we started off doing, and if you want to back out..." He was cut off when he was doused with a gout of water.

"Shut up, Harry," said Susan as she replaced her wand. "We're in this to the end for the same reason we started." She looked into her tea for a moment before saying with feeling, "We're the Orphans, remember?"

All save Remus nodded with feeling. His parents had died in the werewolf attack that had infected him. Many would have said that a soldier of Voldemort had orphaned him, but he didn't see it that way. He had another score to settle some day.

Hermione rubbed the ropy scar through her dress. Her family had enough scars, physical and emotional to qualify for the group.

Harry nodded in thanks, too choked up to reply. Daphne said to Remus and Tonks, "Hermione, Susan and I are the 'Research Team', but primarily it's Hermione. We don't know why Voldemort didn't truly die in '81. Our working premise is that we need to discover that before we can hope to send him on his merry way to the Ninth Circle of Hell."

Remus tapped the lip of his cup before countering, "Maybe not. There may be a way to 'send him on his merry way' regardless of what ritual or procedure he may have undergone."

"Really?" asked Hermione.

Remus shrugged. "Don't know. I'll start scouring the Black Family library tomorrow, it's more likely to have the information we're looking for than here."

With the manic look of vengeance returned, Tonks proposed, "In the meantime, I vote we kill as many Death Eaters as we can."

"Seconded," voted Neville grimly.

Harry looked around. Susan gave a firm nod. Hermione just stared back at her best friend stonily. Remus was quiet, but offered no objection. Daphne's face hardened and she just looked at her husband with a fierce expression. Harry nodded to the group, "Motion is carried."

.oOo.

01 October 1996 Sunday

Young and Rodgers had been merciless on Friday and the Potters had not done much of anything until Sunday afternoon. They were walking through the woods, enjoying the last vestiges of late summer as a warm breeze moved through the trees.

Harry kissed Daphne's hand as they walked and said, "Thank you."

She looked to him quizzically, "For?"

Giving her his lopsided grin, he answered, "For loving me. For

agreeing to marry me. For supporting me like no one ever has. Most of all, for loving me."

Daphne stopped and pulled him into his arms. She could feel him completely relax into her grasp, molding his own body to hers. She didn't know it, but his reaction to being touched had changed radically since the last day of June. Smiling widely, she responded, "Anytime, Harry."

Eventually, they continued their perambulation and she asked, "Where did that come from?"

He shrugged with one shoulder and she prodded him in the ribs. After a playful yelp, he answered her. "I get anxious every once in a while. I want you to be sure that you know exactly how I feel about you. I've read stories about husbands or wives feeling guilt for years after their spouse died. Usually, it's because they parted from their spouse and forgot to tell them they loved them. Just forgot. They weren't having an argument or in a snit. They just forgot.

"I never want that to happen to us. I want you to know every minute of every day; I want it to be a well understood truth for you that I love you."

Daphne couldn't respond through the cloud of her affection and love. She merely wrapped her arm around his waist and pulled him close. As they walked the grounds of their home, Daphne Potter thanked all the gods of heaven, earth and magic that she had this good man.

.oOo.

05 October 1996 Thursday

"Uh-oh," Harry muttered from behind the paper.

Daphne ate another bite of crepe and glanced at the others around

the table. Remus was the only one to have read the front page, but wasn't giving anything away with his expression.

Finally, an exasperated Susan asked, "Ok, I give up Mister mystery man. What's so "Uh-oh?"

Harry chuckled behind the paper, "Mister mystery man?" Shaking his head, he folded the paper and answered her, "Seven articles that ranged from hostility to disagreement toward Amelia."

"But she's only been in office for what? A little over two months? What do they expect?" objected Tonks. She was rabidly in favor of Amelia. The Minister had been an Auror after all, and a damn good one at that.

Harry looked at the now lime-green haired young woman and responded, "Does 'attention seeking liar' or 'deranged and damaged youth' ring a bell with you Tonks?"

The metamorph's face twisted in a grimace of distaste before she answered him, "Yes. It's what those ignoramuses who worked for Fudge spouted off about you last year."

"And the Prophet and most of Britain bought into it."

A tad annoyed, Tonks rejoined, "What does this have to do with Amelia?"

Daphne answered for her husband, "The Prophet isn't very concerned with fairness or even truth. They're concerned with making money."

"Rita Skeeter once told Hermione that 'The Prophet exists to sell itself you silly girl,' and she was right." Harry shook his head in exasperation.

"I guess we need to talk to Amelia about a counter-offensive."

"Who's her Press Secretary?" asked Neville.

Susan answered in a flat tone, "Percy Weasley."

"Great," said Harry, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

.oOo.

That evening at dinner, Daphne had brought up the issue with Amelia to a rather humorous result.

"Amelia, did you notice the articles in the Prophet today?"

Blank look.

"The ones that were fairly hostile toward you and your administration?"

Another blank look.

Somewhat surprised at the lack of response, Daphne pressed on and said, "We'd like to coordinate a counter to these articles for you. We all realize you have quite a bit on your plate."

Susan couldn't hold it in any longer and a ripple of laughter leaked out from behind her hand. Daphne looked to her friend with a quizzical expression.

"Auntie hates the press with a red-hot passion. The only time she reads the paper is when she gets a Floo call about an article." She paused and then continued, "Well, the Quidditch scores also."

With a chagrined expression, Amelia said, "Daphne, get with young Weasley and put together a plan. Brief me on Tuesday before the

Wizengamot session." She continued with a thoughtful expression, "Young Weasley's a holdover from Fudge. If he's unsatisfactory, let me know and I'll replace him forthwith."

.oOo.

06 October 1996 Friday

"Are you ready to deal with this stuffed shirt?" Susan asked Daphne as they strode down the middle of the Ministry Atrium.

Daphne merely gave a wry chuckle and shook her head. Both were dressed in elegant yet businesslike wear. Extremely expensive, extremely fashionable, extremely powerful.

Percy Weasley was a minion. They knew it, but he had his worth in that he was such a stickler for the rules that he would know the ins and outs of the law in this area. From what Harry and Neville had told them, he worshipped authority. They had to overwhelm him to achieve his complete subservience. The last thing they needed was an argument with this redheaded pinhead. The memo in Susan's pocket from Amelia should help matters.

Turning toward the lift, they saw another redheaded person they both knew. "Arthur, what a pleasant surprise," Daphne said with a big smile.

Arthur Weasley approached, his genial self showing in his bright smile. After bowing over Daphne's hand, he said, "My lady, it is wonderful to see you this morning. All is well with you and your husband?"

She nodded at his genuine inquiry, "Yes, we are both well." Turning to Susan, she got a small nod so she said, "My Lady, may I present to you Mr. Arthur Weasley, a good friend of ours. Mr. Weasley, this is Vicountess Bones."

With a small look of surprise, Arthur bowed over Susan's hand and made the appropriate noises. "May I escort you ladies to your destination this morning?"

With a slight shrug, Daphne answered, "Thank you Mr. Weasley, we are en route to your son's office."

The warm smile fell off Arthur Weasley's face in an instant. "Ah. Well, it's just this way on the Fourth floor."

They had a lift to themselves, but Percy's name had created a pall over the group and there was no conversation. The bell rang and the doors opened. "It's just this way," Arthur said and led the way out of the elevator.

Down two corridors and around a corner he indicated a closed door. Giving the two peers a short bow and a smile, he went on his way, the door unopened.

"So sad that the son is such a wanker as to drive away such an inoffensive man – such a pleasant man – as Arthur Weasley," whispered Susan as she reached for the doorknob.

Daphne only nodded, a fleeting sad expression replaced with the 'hard as nails' expression she had worn in the Slytherin common room.

The office was ridiculous. It was immaculately cleaned and it was obvious that 'everything had its place'. A perfectly trimmed eagle quill was decoratively arranged in the center of his immaculate desk. The inbox was empty, but the outbox had a neat stack of tightly rolled scrolls.

Daphne was willing to bet a sackful of galleons the scrolls were all blank.



When the door opened, the immaculately groomed Percival Ignatius Weasley looked up from a massive tome that he had been reading. Seeing the now young women whom he had attended Hogwarts with not so long ago, his face became puzzled.

Inwardly, Daphne cackled; first beat down. Susan had entered the room first followed by Daphne. At Percy's non-greeting, Lady Potter looked about the office with disdain and turned to Susan.

"We shan't be able to work in this hovel. We'll need a larger office."

Picking up on the thread, Susan nodded imperiously, "Indeed." Turning to Percy, she snapped, "Go. Arrange for a conference room for us to work from for the immediate future."

Percy's ingrained responsiveness had him moving around his desk and toward the door before his brain even fired a coherent synapse. He pulled up and snipped, "I'm sorry, but I work for the Minister. Don't you two have classes or some sort to be attending to?" It was somewhat amazing how he managed to pull himself up into his puffed up peacock glory in a microsecond.

"Weasley you ignorant fool. Do you have the slightest conception whom you are speaking to?" Daphne cut at him. Her eyes narrowed and she used her coldest voice, practiced over the years with other ignorant fools like Draco Malfoy and Theodore Nott.

Percy's confusion was evident and just before he began spluttering Daphne spat, "I am Countess Potter, Viscountess Black you fool. This," she indicated to Susan, "Is Viscountess Bones, head of House Bones."

The blank expression on Percy's spectacled face was worth a thousand galleons. The twins would definitely be seeing this later in the pensieve.

When he didn't respond, Daphne continued, "Head of House Bones, a voting member of the Fifteen."

Still no response.

"Head of House Bones that your supervisor, the Minister, belongs to."

Still no response.

What neither Daphne nor Susan realized, and was later explained by the twins, was that Percy was like the Remora fish. He found the biggest, baddest shark in the sea and stuck to it through thick and thin picking up the leavings when best he could.

Despite his burgeoning intelligence and impressive work ethic, he was still very naïve and uninformed about the government. His lack of understanding the importance of the Fifteen being the perfect example.

When Daphne pointed out that Susan was a much bigger shark than even Amelia was, Percy's entire understanding of 'power' in the Ministry was shaken. Hence, his shutdown and reboot.

Finally, life returned to the young man and his face turned red. "My apologies my Ladies. My ignorance of your station is no excuse for my unpardonable rudeness. How can I be of service to you today?"

They had no reason to suspect, but the war against Voldemort had just taken an unexpected turn for the better.

A/N

1. I own nothing. I am blown away by the volume and enthusiasm of the reviews. It is truly humbling to this unworthy scribbler of thoughts and drabbles to be on the receiving end of your reviews. Thank you.

2. Quite a few reviews have objected to the Death Eaters 'targeting' Harry and his friends, claiming it's unrealistic, ridiculous... To address the issue, I'll simply say this: They're not targeting Harry and his friends.

Hermione's family was attacked in response to the raid on the Department of Mysteries. She's unprotected and unwarded: a seemingly soft target.

Cyrus Greengrass was killed in target to Harry and Daphne in response to losing 13 Death Eaters when attacking Hermione's family. The whole family was to be killed and incompetence is the only reason Cyrus was the only one killed.

Lady Augusta was injured at a fundraiser luncheon the Death Eaters raided to sow some fear. Sheer happenstance.

The Tonks were targeted because they were well-known blood traitors (Bellatrix's sister anyone?). Again, happenstance.

All the other engagements, Harry et al have courted or deliberately sought out. Only two were targeted at the boy-who-lived and they were in response to previous Death Eater losses.

## Chapter 12

12 October, 1996 Thursday

"Daph?"

"Hmmm?"

"Could you scratch my back?"

"Sure. There?"

"Up a little higher."

"There?"

"Oh yeah. Harder." Harry sighed loudly, "Thanks, love."

"Anytime, Harry."

As they lay there in bed, Daphne reflected on the past few weeks. Astoundingly, Percy Weasley had rapidly become an asset that they had needed: An intelligent person to manage the press on a constant basis.

Amelia didn't have time, nor the inclination to give Percy the guidance and supervision that he needed. Daphne and Susan provided that role and also gave Percy the Press Secretary lessons in society manners.

"Weasley, if you take that condescending tone with any reporter I shall personally castrate you. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Lady Potter. Quite clear."

Little conversations like that had been very common in The

Instruction and Preparation of Percy the Press Secretary. It had paid off like the feeding of the five thousand.

Currently, Percy was making significant inroads with the beat reporters for The Daily Prophet, The Dublin Daily News, The Edinburg Seer, The Manhattan Oracle, Le Magique de Paris, Roma, and The Tokyo Times. They all knew Voldemort was back. They all wanted the scoop. Percy was directed to oblige them. Well, oblige them somewhat.

"There is a slight difference between 'news' and 'propaganda', Weasley."

After a long moment, Percy admitted, "I'm sorry, but I don't know what the difference is."

With a feral smile, Daphne explained, "'Propaganda' is what Fudge released. 'News' is what we release."

For the first few press conferences that he conducted, Daphne and Susan were disillusioned in the back of the room to evaluate his behavior.

"Surprisingly, he has promise."

"When he is prepared, he can dissimulate with the best of them, give out hard facts that we want released and conceal that which needs to be concealed." Daphne slowly smiled. "He should have been a Slytherin."

Susan shook her head and chuckled, "Come on, let's go hit Sloan Street before the stores close."

Arm in arm they headed for the apparition point.

The next day, they set Percy on his next mission: Get the word out

that Lord Voldemort was being blocked at many, but not all turns. They needed to get the point across that the Ministry was acting on the public's behalf and was successful; however, Voldemort still had teeth. A delicate balance between announcing a Triumph and casting hopes to the wind.

"Don't get all pompous up there and have the attitude expecting subservience from the press. They're jackals and hyenas who will strip your bones at the earliest opportunity." Daphne had warned Percy about this attitude of his on many occasions and it seemed that the lesson was beginning to settle into his grey matter.

"So, a partnership where I am the senior partner is the best attitude?"

Susan smiled, "Yes. That's it exactly. Now, we've a ten o'clock with Connie Hammer to bring you up to speed on the efforts, both past and ongoing, to counter the Voldemort threat."

.oOo.

Neville and Harry hadn't been idle while their ladies had been tied up at the Ministry. They had been politicking the older members of the Fifteen and receiving guidance from Abbott, MacMillan and surprisingly Jones, on the more influential members of the Wizengamot body proper.

"Sir Edward Grey is a most interesting and powerful person," opined Reginald Abbott. He sat back in his chair as he and Victoria dined with Harry and Daphne for lunch at Black's, a fashionable Wizarding restaurant off Diagon Alley.

"Why so?"

"As a young man he was involved in the muggle political arena. Even rose to be Foreign Minister if I remember rightly. After the first muggle Great War, he bowed out of the spotlight and retired to his fishing and

hunting. The bug hit him again when he turned one hundred, so he assumed his family's Wizengamot seat and began working again. Fellow must be pushing one hundred and ten if he's a day old. Strangely enough, his work in the muggle world combined with his family's enormous fortune has garnered him a large portion of respect on the floor."

Daphne thought back and remembered a lean, white haired wizard that she'd seen at the convocations she'd attended. There had always been a crowd of members around him that strongly reminded her of bees around a flower.

With a serious expression, Abbott changed course on Harry. "Potter, we must stop ramroding laws through. Things are tense enough without the Fifteen telling all of Magical Britain how to live. We need to start winning allies and building coalitions, else things could go badly."

Harry adopted a neutral expression and half looked down at his plate. Daphne held her breath as she recognized that her husband was trying to control his temper.

After a long moment, Harry silently exhaled and looked Abbott in the eye. "I will do that which is right. The Wizengamot does not have a sterling track record to recommend itself to me as a capable and trustworthy governing body. In theory, what you say is very true. However, I do not suffer fools gladly and the Wizengamot proper has shown itself to be either scoundrels who follow the richest voice or the largest collection of village idiots in the northern hemisphere. I have no tolerance for corruption nor capitulation in any form to Voldemort through graft or stupidity. So far, my experience is that the Wizengamot has done quite a bit of both activities."

Daphne softly smiled as her husband very respectfully and gently rebuked his elder. Glancing at Victoria, she saw the blond had cocked a brow and had a small smile of her own.

Reginald nodded in agreement, paused and then said, "Harry, don't think that I disagree – I agree with you completely. I'm just saying that it would make life much easier for all if we could have more support on the floor." He looked to his wife and added, "I don't want the Death Eaters at Stony Brook like they were for MacMillan at Thistledown."

He's frightened. Daphne reached under the table and squeezed Harry's knee to get his attention. When he glanced at her, she softened her expression some and gave a small nod.

He caught her meaning and said, "And I don't want the bastards at Rowan Hill, either. I can understand your sentiment all too well." Harry got a far away look in his eyes and added, "If any one of us understand that sentiment, it's Longbottom, Bones, my wife and me."

Coming to his senses, Reginald realized what he'd said and to whom. Abbott tried to apologize all over himself which Harry forestalled with a smile and a pat on the man's shoulder. "Don't worry about it."

"Call Phalanx Home Defense and Warders. They're expensive, but very good."

.oOo.

18 October, 1996 Wednesday

Wiping his face after a melee with the four friends, Remus and Tonks, Harry got an idea. Recognizing his far away expression, Daphne asked, "What devilry are you planning?"

His lopsided grin still made her stomach do a back flip. He strolled up to her and planted a quick kiss on her lips. Without looking away from her he asked, "Tonks, where is Malfoy Manor?"

There was a long pause before the young Auror answered with a



question. "Are you shitting me?"

"No. At least, I don't think so."

Neville laughed at his remark while Susan and Daphne rolled their eyes. Remus just sat on a conjured bench and watched the fireworks.

"I think we should pay a visit to cousin Narcissa. She must be so lonely with her husband and son in Azkaban. For life." Harry was now teasing Daphne's hair as he mused aloud.

"Are you thinking about a visit in the middle of the night, possibly?" Susan asked with a big grin.

"Perhaps." Taking Daphne's hand in his he led her into the house. "We'll be down in a bit. Have a think on it and we can talk about it before dinner."

.oOo.

"Ok, Harry. Here's the situation." Tonks was at her most professional as she dissected the layout of Malfoy Manor. Wards, topography and the house layout. She had apparated to Auror Headquarters immediately and taken everything she could find regarding the Malfoy ancestral seat. The on watch intelligence officer had tried to stop her, but wasn't really successful. She was sure he'd forgive her when he woke up.

Unusual for the planning of their nocturnal forays was the presence of Amelia Bones and Connie Hammer in the study. Tonks had suggested that they should include the Ministry in at least an informative nature. Shrugging, Harry had responded, "I trust Amelia and Connie. Not many more, though. Don't even think about Scrimgeour."

The four friends, Hermione, Remus, Amelia and Connie listened in silence as Tonks gave an excellent briefing. At the end, Susan asked questions regarding the stream at the back of the property.

"It looks like the wards cross the stream."

Daphne smiled, "Looking to do a little swimming?"

"If it means we don't have to rip the wards down and let everyone and their brother know we're coming."

Nodding, Harry turned to Amelia and asked, "How do you feel about another Reserve Auror being added to the rolls?"

.oOo.

"You want me to be an Auror and help you on missions that may be of dubious legality." The expression of amused disbelief on Bill's face was priceless.

Harry smiled and Daphne laughed. Neville smothered his chuckles in Susan's hair as she smiled at the cursebreaker. Hermione's lips twitched as she attempted to maintain the semblance of seriousness

"Yes."

"Bill, who do you think took out Nott Manor? Or the Death Eaters in Knockturn Alley? Or the Death Eaters at Lord MacMillan's home?" Susan asked at her most demure.

With a wolfish smile, the eldest Weasley brother responded, "That was you guys?" When he got four nods and a smile from Hermione, he continued, "I'm in. What's the target?"

"Well, it has to do with this little stream over here."

They approached the table in the study and Bill looked over the ward map. As he talked to himself and scribbled on a spare bit of parchment, Remus and Tonks ended the Disillusionment charm on themselves. Bill was so taken up in his evaluation, he didn't even notice.

"Looks like we've got a new person on the team," commented Remus.

"Eight's a good number," Daphne replied as she snuggled into her husband's arms.

Waving his hand, Bill caught their attention and pointed at the map. The team gathered around the table as Bill began.

"Most likely, the wards do not go much below the water. A few inches at best. Most wards that have a function that interacts with the ground which prevents people from digging under them. It's an obscure process called inversion. Long story short, it keeps people from digging under," he finished with a smile.

"Anyway, water is different. Again, long story short, it just is." Harry smiled at Hermione's expression. Daphne smothered her own smiles as she could tell that Bill was in for quite a rigorous interrogation by the muggleborn witch after this was over.

"The team can most likely just swim under the ward. However," he explained with a very serious expression, "The warders for this estate were not idiots. By the way, which home is this?"

"Malfoy Manor."

"Oh. So very old and very thorough wards. Therefore, the warders most likely were aware of this little trap door as well. I expect the stream is littered with cursed objects, magical and muggle predators. Lots of nasties." Bill was tapping his chin with the pencil in his hand,

lost in thought.

A wide grin slowly blossomed on his face. "I have an idea."

20 October, 1996 Friday

Daphne was curled up on the couch of the informal Sitting Room. The oversize fireplace had a nice sized fire that was crackling and provided a nice warmth for the room.

She turned the page of her latest romance novel, thoroughly savoring her hidden pleasure. With a quick spell she'd transfigured the cover to imitate her Ancient Runes book. Even though she enjoyed the stories, she surely didn't want to advertise what she was reading. This was one of her favorite story lines; the underage Veela who loved the young hero and complemented, supported and loved him so that he could defeat evil. She sighed as she turned the page.

A groan from her mother caused her to look up. Evelyn had been visiting George Stebbins quite a bit lately. Daphne wasn't stupid and could tell that there was much more than friendship between the two and it probably had been going on for quite some time.

Her mother had been either cheating on Daphne's father or was at least in love with George while being physically faithful to her husband. Somehow, Daphne couldn't find an ounce of moral outrage at the situation. Sighing, she realized how much she had truly despised her father. Thinking back to her observation about Tonks and her father, she wished that she'd had a father that was worthy of her love, affection and respect. Unfortunately, that was not the case.

Blinking back sudden tears, she realized that she was quite happy for her mother. It was obvious that her mother was more blissful than Daphne ever remembered her and if it was due to her blossoming relationship with George, so be it. Evelyn shook the cobwebs out,

poured another mug of cider for herself and topped off her son's mug of hot chocolate.

Phillip was polishing his Firebolt. He'd fainted when Harry had presented it to him. The young lad was roused to quite a bit of teasing from his sisters and a burning red face. Phillip had held Harry in high esteem before, now the young head of Clan Greengrass worshipped his brother-in-law.

Susan and Neville were cuddling on the loveseat opposite her. Daphne suspected that Neville was actually asleep, so didn't want to disturb them. Susan was playing with his hair and gave Daphne a happy smile when she caught her eye.

Daphne smiled back and wished Harry would hurry up. He and Amelia were talking with Connie, Tonks, Remus and Bill about the upcoming raid on Malfoy Manor. The Ministry was going to have two Auror Response Teams available on the 25th, the day they were going.

Connie had mentioned to her that she was most concerned that there would be a large number of Death Eaters holed up at the estate. Lucius was the most recognized of the Azkaban internees and Connie had warned the group not to play the hero. If they were outnumbered, "Get the holy hell out of there!"

Daphne frowned. From the hallway she could hear someone cursing fluently and most eloquently. The fireplace roared as someone used the Floo to leave. Looking at Susan, she saw her friend frowning as well. Neville was most definitely awake and stood to head out of the room.

A red faced Tonks stormed into the room followed by the others. Amelia stopped short and dropped the bomb.

"Azkaban has been leveled. The Dementors we had trapped there

are out and all the imprisoned Death Eaters have escaped." Looking at her niece, she added, "Don't wait up for me. I may not be back for a few days.

23 October, 1996 Monday

Amelia sat at the dinner table heavily. Frowning, Daphne asked, "Is all well, Amelia?"

"Not even remotely, my dear," answered the sitting Minister for Magic. "The Prime Minister ripped my head off today about this ongoing killing of thirteen muggles a day. That plus the Azkaban nightmare and he's less than pleased with the leadership of Her Majesty's magical subjects."

Amelia sighed and said, "I don't blame him one bit. I'm furious about it, but as I explained to the man, we're doing all we can." She gave Daphne a beady eye and finished, "As you can probably guess, he was less than reassured."

Susan cleared her throat and asked, "Why don't we turn it around on them?"

Amelia's brow furrowed. "Explain."

"We target known Death Eaters and eliminate them."

The furrow on Amelia's brow was now matched with a frown. "I don't like that idea. Tit for tat sounds good in a novel, but in real life it's an ugly thing. Plus, we need evidence. I will not become that which we fight and randomly kill persons we suspect of being Voldemort supporters."

"What is Harry? Chopped liver?"

"Huh?" a thoroughly bemused Lord Potter so eloquently stated from

the head of the table.

Rolling her eyes, Lady Bones responded, "Harry, your memory from the end of the Triwizard had what, thirty or forty Death Eaters in the graveyard? All don't have to be killed. Just most. Take the captures and drain them dry with Veritaserum and Legilimency."

Pursing his lips, Harry sat back in his chair. He caught Daphne's eye and she tried to send the love she felt for him as reassurance. "It's a good idea, love."

Harry nodded and told Amelia, "I'd be willing to submit a memory of that evening for the DMLE to pick apart. I wouldn't be surprised if many of them are not in hiding."

Susan's face hardened for a moment before she reminded her Aunt, "Not that long ago you said the gloves were coming off."

Amelia nodded and forked some salad into her mouth as she ruminated. Exhaling, she chuckled to herself and looked at her niece ruefully. A more relaxed Amelia took another bite of her salad and chewed for a bit as she deliberated. Looking at Harry for a long moment, she directed, "Make the memory copy. I'll take it in tomorrow."

They finished the meal in silence. As Amelia made her way out of the room, she paused and said, "Thank you, Harry."

25 October, 1996 Wednesday

As they planned for their 'excursion' to Malfoy Manor, Harry had offered up using the same pattern they'd used for taking down Nott Manor.

Remus had frowned. At Harry's prompting he responded, "Usually, you don't want to fall into a pattern when conducting reconnaissance

missions and raids. If the enemy is smart – and Voldemort is very smart – they will pick up on the pattern and lie in wait for it."

"It's a balance between originality and following up a proven modus operandi."

Harry nodded and the group discussed how to mix in originality to their plan.

The reconnaissance had been benign. Bill and Hermione had analyzed the wards and collected more data. The four friends had patrolled the area in their animal forms, finding nothing out of the ordinary. All in all, it looked pretty good.

"That's what scares the hell out of me," responded Connie Hammer when Neville had voiced that same thought.

At three AM the eight man team gathered around a brass hoop portkey. Tonks checked everyone over to ensure gear was strapped on tightly. When she got to Remus, she goosed him to which he jumped.

"Not now Tonks!" he hissed at her.

"Sorry, Wolfie. You're just too damn sexy. I can't control myself."

The group chuckled. Remus, Tonks, Hermione and Bill all drew their wands while the four friends prepared to shift as soon as the portkey dropped them off.

"All ready?" Tonks got seven nods and then cackled, "Aaawwwayyyy we go! Activate!"

Once the swirling sensation faded and they landed, Daphne shifted to The Wolf. Gathering her bearings, she took off to the west in the loping run of a wolf. Behind her, she heard The Hawk beating her



wings to gain altitude. The Bear was heading east while The Tiger prowled in the vicinity of the stream.

Slowing to a trot, The Wolf listened. The sounds of the forest at night gave nothing away. She could hear Remus, Tonks and Hermione set up their defensive positions around Bill as he began to analyze the wards. Hermione was going to continue to act as Bill's assistant for the operation. They all joked that Susan and Daphne were the only others that could understand what he was saying, but they couldn't take very good notes when Shifted.

Returning to the present, far away in the distance she could barely make out the shambling run of The Bear.

No hostile scents came to her so she slowed to a walk and began exploring the area a bit. They had appeared on the northern edge of the warded area of the Manor. They didn't need to scout the entirety of the grounds, but with the escape of thirty odd Death Eaters – including Lucius Malfoy – the team was taking no chances.

She heard a short, high pitched whistle and turned back to the portkey landing point. Finding the other seven waiting for her, she Shifted to her human form and reported, "Nothing."

Harry nodded and then told her, "Go ahead."

Per Bill's idea, Daphne stunned Remus. Quickly transfiguring the stunned man into a steel rod, she repeated the process on Hermione, Bill and Tonks.

"God, I hope this works," muttered Harry.

Bill had postulated that the wards would not inhibit inanimate objects. During their reconnaissance, he had casually thrown rocks across the ward line to no effect. While everyone waited on tenterhooks, The Tiger had leapt across the stream to no effect either. Thus 'the idea'

transitioned to 'the plan'.

The four friends Shifted and The Wolf gathered up a rod in her mouth – Hermione she thought. The Tiger had two rods and The Bear had another. Five minutes later, the four friends were well inside the ward line and in a secluded stand of pine trees. Dropping the rods, Daphne Shifted back to restore the other four while The Tiger and Bear fanned out to keep watch. The Hawk continued to circle overhead.

Soon, the other four members of the team were sitting on the pine needles and shaking their heads. It had been Hermione's idea to stun the non-shifters first before transfiguring them. They didn't want to have any sensory deprivation issues after being transfigured into an inanimate object. Four quick Pepper Up potions later and they were ready to go.

Bill and Hermione would be taking up the rear. They were needed along the intended egress route in order to tear down the wards if need be. Bill had a satchel that he had filled with 'ward busters'. They were rune engraved stones that had been charged with magic via leeching from ley lines. Effectively, they were magical bombs. In a discussion with Harry, Bill had estimated they would need three ward busters to initiate a catastrophic cascading casualty to the Malfoy wards. Harry had purchased ten. Never hurt to be safe.

Tonks and Remus were in the center of the formation following The Wolf. She had shown to be the best at tracking and being aware of her surroundings. Forming an arrowhead with The Wolf at the tip, The Tiger and The Bear fanned out to the sides. As usual, The Hawk was providing top cover.

When they reached the formal gardens, The Tiger and Bear were to return to the center and Shift. The Hawk was to land, Shift and the group would proceed to the back of the manor house.

From there...well, they'd stop in to say hello to cousin Narcissa.

In a loose line, they approached the French Doors facing the veranda in back of the manor house. Daphne approached the doors with Neville and Harry on each shoulder. She hid a small smile. The guys – Harry in particular - were looking extremely fierce and protective. She'd have to tell him later how dead sexy he was when he was like that.

Shaking off the extraneous thoughts, Daphne cast diagnostic charms and found no ward or detection charms outside of a simple locking charm on the doors.

A flick of her wand and the doors opened. Bill and Hermione took up defensive positions on the outside of the house. The other six ghosted through the doorway.

After much discussion, they'd decided to stay together in the house. Usually, Neville and Susan would split from Harry and Daphne. Both Remus and Tonks had expressed reservations about that idea.

"Harry, massed concentrated fire is always better than speed in a suspected hotspot," Remus had argued.

"Why do you say Malfoy Manor is a hotspot?"

Tonks had an amused expression, "Harry, use the brains the creator gave you. Of course there are going to be a zillion Death Eaters there."

Shrugging, Harry capitulated.

The hallways were wide enough for the team to have a bit of separation. Remus and Harry were up front, flanked by Daphne and Tonks. Susan and Neville had rear guard walking backwards every so often to ensure they had no unexpected visitors.

The intent was to clear the main floor and then move upstairs if they had time. If everything went perfectly, they'd attempt to investigate and sub-levels to the home. Daphne had voiced the thought they all shared, "So we won't be going to the dungeons then?"

"Probably."

The Grand Dining Room, Ballroom, Library and Formal Sitting room were all empty. However, both the Library and Grand Dining Room showed evidence of recent use. Parchment and maps were scattered over desks and tables. Remus hadn't even bothered to see what they were; he shrunk the entire mess and stuffed it into his pocket.

Tonks waved her hands to get the rest of the groups' attention. When they gathered around she deliberately pointed to the double doors of which she was standing in front.

"Lots in here. Don't know how many."

Harry leaned into her ear and whispered, "Get ready to activate the emergency beacon if we need it," to which Tonks nodded her head.

Harry looked around at the seven grave faces and then gave Susan a nod. She lifted her wand and cast, "Reducto!"

.oOo.

The swarms of black robes made the room appear like a snake pit.

"Fuck," Tonks muttered as her hand dashed to her pocket and the emergency beacon. Activating it would bring the First and Third Auror Emergency Response Team within five minutes.

Now, they just had to survive that long.

In concert, eight beams of eldritch fire leapt out of wands into the teeming mass of Death Eaters.

Daphne and Susan immediately began conjuring animals while the other six continued their bombardment of the thirty or so Death Eaters that they could see.

Susan and Daphne conjured a lion, tiger, bear, animated saw blades, animated swords and spears. With a quick set of charms, they all attacked the boil of Voldemort slaves from the flanks, tearing into cloth and flesh. The lion was pulverized by a Blasting curse, but the bear rushed through the attack and brought the Death Eater down before moving on to its next victim.

Four headless Death Eaters fell to the animated objects before anyone could even react. A surprisingly intelligent Death Eater cast a shield around the blades, immobilizing them. Unfortunately for him, he missed the spear which impaled itself on him a moment later. His compatriot then Vanished the confined objects.

The tiger was running rampant. With swipes of its great paws, Death Eaters fell like wheat before the scythe. It too was dispatched by a Blasting curse from behind.

The screams of the wounded and dying began to get louder. By her count, Daphne saw sixteen immobile Death Eaters.

"Ah, crap!" Tonks shouted.

Over the heads of the Death Eaters, they could see the top of double doors at the opposite end of the room. Tonks was bemoaning the fact that they had just opened. Unfortunately, the light sided fighters could only assume reinforcements were boiling out of a further room.

Harry, Remus and Neville were casting like machines. They stood in

a semi-circle with Harry in the middle. Remus' face was drawn in an unconscious snarl. Flashing his teeth, he cut down Death Eaters in front of him.

Neville's expression was slack. His wand a blur, he let the intensive training they'd had over the previous months take over.

Harry had to be the scariest to his enemies. He spun out of the way of a Killing curse and Daphne saw his eyes glowing green. Not just the iris – the entire eye was glowing with magical power.

Casting in frenzy, the three men tried to keep the Death Eaters pinned down, killing when they could. Bone Breakers, Decapitation curses, Piercing charms, Reductor curses, Cutting curses, and a few Ribbon Cutters fell like hail. No Stunning spells or Full Body Binds were cast that night. Tonks was behind the group, shielding the men.

Now that the Transfigured items had been sent on their way, Daphne and Susan stepped in front of Tonks and added their own firepower to the covering fire. Conjured chain, cannon balls, railroad spikes and thousands of ball bearings tore into the Death Eater ranks, cutting the black robed thugs apart.

Some of the Death Eaters were recovering from the surprise and began to fight back. Emerald green Killing curses began to rocket across the expanse between the two groups. Fortunately for the attackers, the recovering Death Eaters were in the back of the room, screened by their dying friends.

Susan and Daphne began to rapidly conjure low marble walls for the team to duck behind when the Unforgivables began flying. Chips of marble were thrown in the air when the Cruciatus or Killing curse impacted.

The incoming fire picked up significantly. Susan and Daphne had to assist Tonks with the shielding now as Tonks' shields were buckling

too often for effectiveness.

A Slicing curse penetrated the shield group and felled Neville, his shoulder bleeding heavily.

The room was thick with magic. The veritable firestorm of eldritch fire made it hard to see and the attackers weren't even aiming any more. They were just casting in a general direction hoping to hit their enemy.

A dark Bludgeoning curse knocked down the shields and shattered Daphne's right knee. Screaming, she fell to the ground. Through the haze of pain, she heard Harry scream, "NO!"

He was there a moment later and cast a Numbing charm on her leg. Watching him through the tears of pain, she saw his face go slack and his body begin to shimmer.

The slackness contorted into a snarl and the boy-who-lived began to glow with a blue-black light. Spinning around, Harry glared at the Death Eaters. The light surrounding him pulsed and he lifted his hands as he began to float a foot in the air over his wife. Staring at them, his hands curled into claws as he lifted them over his head.

Throwing back his head in a silent scream, Harry unleashed his rage, fear and magic.

The wave of power exploded from him like a shockwave. The front ranks of the Death Eaters were immolated and the rest knocked to the ground.

There was silence as both sides stood and gaped.

Harry fell to the ground and Daphne crawled over to him. Covering him with her body, she looked up and saw a horrific sight. At the other end of the huge room was a dais. Seeing over the fallen Death

Eaters she saw an ornate throne upon which was seated a shocked Lord Voldemort.

The shock retreated quickly to be replaced by incandescent rage. As the monster slowly rose, Daphne felt herself being levitated. She looked around and saw a bloody-faced Susan lifting her. Tonks was limping and levitating Harry while Remus and Neville cast covering fire. The men cast one Concussion hex after another, rocking the world again. It was time to leave.

They'd lasted three minutes and twenty-two seconds.

Hurrying down the hall to the back doors, Daphne heard Tonks shout, "WE'RE LEAVING! BRING DOWN THE WARDS NOW GODDAMMIT!"

There was a deafening explosion that shook the world for a third time. With that, Daphne sank into blissful oblivion.

26 October, 1996 Thursday

Consciousness was thrust upon Daphne as some stupid bastard opened the curtains, letting sunlight fall on her face.

"Good morning," said an insanely chipper voice.

"Go away."

A clucking tongue caused Daphne to reach for her wand. Not finding it, she cracked open an eye to see a nurse writing on a chart. Looking about the room, Daphne saw her mother asleep in a chair next to Phillip who was asleep on the couch.

Panicked, she began looking for Harry. "Where is my husband?" she asked hurriedly.



"He's fine, dear. Calm down now. We don't want you to hurt yourself."

"Fuck you and tell me where my husband is NOW!"

The nurse's cheerful face closed up. "He's in the room next door."

Daphne pulled the sheets off her and made to stand.

"Now, now, dear. You must stay in bed!" the nurse clucked.

Fear mixing with rage, Daphne snarled, "You will address me as 'My Lady' or 'Your Ladyship'. Do you understand? Now get out of my way."

Daphne wobbled past the incensed nurse and her waking mother. Looking both ways out the hall, she saw Aurors outside of another room and headed toward it.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," the red robed Auror apologized. "No one is allowed into this room."

Narrowing her eyes, she replied, "Thank you for your diligence, but that's my husband in there."

With a look of apology the man moved to the side, allowing Daphne entrance.

Harry lay on the bed without bruise or blemish. If she didn't know better, Daphne would have thought him only asleep. Pressing the call button on the wall, she waited for the nurse to come explain his situation.

As she stood there, her leg began to throb. Quickly finding two chairs, she sat in one and put her right leg on the other. The throbs quickly receded. As she watched Harry, she absently began to massage her thigh and calf.

When there was a commotion at the door, Daphne saw her mother trying to get in. "Let her in please, she's my mother and Lord Potter's mother-in-law."

"Yes, ma'am."

Evelyn rushed in the room with her hair all coming out of its bun. Looking over her daughter, she asked, "How are you?"

Shrugging, Daphne answered, "My leg hurts a bit, but when I keep it elevated it's Ok." She paused then asked, "Harry?"

"Magical exhaustion only. A few cuts, but that's it. George says he should be on his feet in a few days."

Exhaling with relief, Daphne said, "Thanks, mum. Anyone else in here?"

"Well, Susan and Neville needed some work, but didn't stay overnight. Amelia was here for quite a while, but went home around sunrise. She was quite worried about you two. Even Lady Augusta came by for a few hours to sit with you and Harry."

Evelyn paused, then gathered her courage to ask, "Blue-eyes, what are you involved in? What has Harry roped you into?"

Eyes glittering with anger, Daphne turned on her mother like a snake. "My husband hasn't roped me into anything, mother. We are doing our part in the war against Voldemort and the Death Eaters. Beyond that, I can't tell you."

Narrowing her eyes, she added, "I know your family has always been neutral in the Dark/Light wars, but let me tell you here and now, the Potters stand against the darkness." Taking a deep breath and rubbing her face, Daphne relaxed a bit before adding, "I'm a Potter

now. Harry has to do this and I'll go to hell and back for him. It's the right thing to do."

Evelyn nodded and stood. As her mother was walking to the window, Daphne saw an expression of unutterable sadness cross her face. Looking out the window, Evelyn said, "I love you and only want the best for you. I'll help you in any way I can."

Turning back to watch over her husband, Daphne absently replied, "Thanks mum."

.oOo.

Hermione stopped by after lunch with a box of baked goods. "I bought them on the way over. My mother is a great woman, but a terrible cook."

Daphne smiled, toasted her friend with a bun and munched on the sugary confection. Harry was sleeping now whereas before he had been unconscious. The Healers made a big deal about the difference, but to Daphne it was irrelevant.

"I want my Harry back," she muttered.

Hermione nodded and gave her friend a light hug. "So do I."

Shaking off the maudlin feelings, she asked, "So what happened after I passed out?"

"Bill set off five of the ward busters." She shook her head in disbelief at the memory, "It was astounding. I could see the magical discharge and then feel the wards shatter like glass. It was pretty incredible."

"Anyway, you all came out. Susan had a rough looking cut on her scalp and Neville was bleeding heavily from his shoulder. You should have seen Remus – he was like a man possessed. I didn't know a

person could cast that fast. He sent one Concussion hex after the other to prevent anyone following. Blew out his eardrums doing it too. Malfoy Manor is quite trashed."

"Tonks grabbed a small communicator out of her pocket and called off the Emergency Response Teams as you, Harry, Susan and Neville were portkeyed here. Apparently, she didn't want them to get slaughtered."

Daphne shivered. She knew that a healthy dollop of luck was one of the main reasons they all made it out alive. True, they had been training together non-stop for months and that showed in their coordination, attack and defensive patterns. By all rights though, they shouldn't have made it out alive.

"Tonks estimated there were over fifty Death Eaters plus Voldemort there last night."

Nodding, Daphne took another bun from the box and concurred, "Easily. If not more."

"So, the wounded got away, Tonks called off the cavalry and then the four of us portkeyed here as well. Tonks had a twisted knee, Remus his ears but Bill and I were unscathed."

"Is the Ministry planning a full scale raid?"

"I don't know. Amelia was here last night and had a long talk with Tonks and Remus. As soon as she was cleared, Tonks apparated away. I can only assume they are planning something."

"Good. I doubt anyone will be there, but who knows?"

Hermione shrugged and finished, "Remus was fixed up in a jiffy. He took Susan back to Rowan Hill while Neville apparated home after he was healed."

Daphne nodded, happy that her friends were all healthy and safe.

Just then, Harry groaned and rubbed his face as he exhaled loudly. He screwed up his face after a whiff of his breath and blindly reached for his wand.

Daphne smiled and took pity on her man. Casting a quick Breath Freshening charm on him, she then asked, "How do you feel, love?"

He cracked his eyes open and squinted at her, "Tired."

She nodded at the expected answer, "The Healer says you're just suffering from mild magical exhaustion and will be up to snuff later today or tomorrow."

He nodded then asked, "Everyone Ok?"

"Yes. Neville and Susan were cut up, Remus blew out his eardrums and Tonks twisted her knee, but they're all healed and good to go now."

"What about you, wife?"

She shrugged, "My knee is sore, but the Healer says I'll have a full recovery. I told her about our workout schedule and she said to keep following it, just take it easy on the runs for a week or two."

He nodded and was silent for a long moment. "He was there last night wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"Damn. I missed him."

Hobbling over to her husband's bed, she sat next to him and gently

rubbed his chest. "You'll get him. Sooner rather than later. However, last night showed us all that you can't do it alone."

He nodded and squeezed her hand, content for the moment.

28 October, 1996 Saturday

Daphne and Harry decided that it was time to open up Rowan Hill to their friends for an informal dinner party. Hermione had come over around noon to help with some of the preparations, but was put off by Dobby and Nob.

"Dobby and Nob are doing the cleaning and preparing for the Master and Mistress, Miss Grangey. You be going outside now," Dobby yammered at Hermione as he unceremoniously ushered the young witch to the veranda.

With a dumbfounded expression, she saw the entire household on the veranda. Everyone had a sheepish expression.

Daphne owned up to the truth. "Dobby ushered us all out here."

Evelyn and Amelia looked up from their book and the paper, smiled and returned to relaxing.

Harry was a bit confused why Hermione corralled Daphne around three to help her get ready for the festivities. Daphne had merely rolled her eyes at her husband, patted him on the head and said, "I'll explain everything to you later dear. As usual."

Remus and Tonks arrived with Neville. The Weasley boys arrived right at six. They heard Bill, Fred and George before they saw them.

"Ah, it's so good to be back here isn't it brothers?"

"Indubitably, brother. What say you older brother?"

"That you're both mentally deranged and I disavow all relation to you."

"You wound me brother!"

"Indeed!"

"Why are you wearing those ridiculous trousers?"

"Ridiculous? These are the height of fashion!"

"Tell me the truth, though. Do they make my bum look big?"

At this point, everyone on the veranda was laughing. Susan, who didn't have a lot of exposure to the twins, was holding on to Neville as she laughed. Remus smiled wistfully, obviously remembering James and Sirius acting like the twins, while he vainly attempted to bring a smidgen of sanity to their lives.

As the three laughing redheads exited the house, the laughter redoubled itself. The twins were wearing leather plaid bellbottom trousers. They were a strange white/blue/yellow pattern that was so loud as to be deafening.

"Hermione! Come on! Bill and the twins are here!"

Hermione came downstairs and all heads turned. She was beautiful. Her clothes were just right and Daphne had helped her with her hair and makeup. An elaborate braid worked down the back of her scalp in a most fetching way.

Harry looked at his oldest friend with stunned amazement. After a long moment he turned to his wife and cocked an eyebrow in lieu of a question.

"Look at Bill," Daphne whispered in reply.

Harry turned in the direction Daphne indicated and saw the eldest Weasley brother standing there thunderstruck. His drink forgotten, he almost dumped his pint on his shoes when he saw Hermione.

Turning back to his wife, Harry asked, "Really?"

Daphne nodded and pulled him over to a corner of the veranda. Speaking low, she said, "She really likes him and I think he fancies her a bit. They are the only two singles that can actually have an intelligent conversation with each other. I mean, really. Can you see Hermione and Ron Weasley discussing the intricacies of the third universal law of transfiguration and its implications in daily life?"

Raising his eyebrows, Harry nodded in agreement. "Not really, no." After a long pause, he asked, "So, how old is Bill?"

Narrowing her eyes, Daphne answered, "It's none of your business, husband, how old he is or the age difference between the two of them."

"But..."

"Stow your butts, Harry." Softening, she ran her hands on his chest in a possessive manner before adding, "I know you see her as your sister and you only want the best for her. I know that you'll destroy anyone that hurts her. Fortunately, so too does everyone else. She's a big girl who can take care of herself. She's seventeen Harry. An adult for all intents and purposes. Plus, Bill's a pretty good guy."

Exhaling loudly, he kissed her on the forehead and pulled her close. She could feel him nuzzling into her hair before he muttered, "I can't protect her can I?"

She smiled and squeezed her man tight, "Not always, love. Come on,



let's mingle and enjoy tonight."

They began mixing with their guests and Daphne was forcibly reminded of how much fun the twins were. In an innuendo laden conversation, they managed to infer that she and Harry ought to be having problems walking due to 'extracurricular activities'.

"Ah, boys. If only you knew," Daphne sighed, kissed them both on the cheek and then mock-hobbled to the drinks table. She looked back and joined in the resultant laughter.

Turning back she saw Harry and Remus laughing about something the older man was saying. Remus noticed her watching and raised his glass in a friendly salute. She smiled at him and then stiffened.

With a crash, Harry dropped the plate he was carrying, his hors d'oeuvres scattering across the slate of the veranda. Effortlessly, Daphne vaulted over the table as Harry's hands flew to his head.

Remus dropped his pint and moved to steady the now staggering Harry. By the time Daphne got to him, Harry had steadied and was panting like a racehorse. She placed herself in front of his face as his eyes narrowed in concentration and effort.

He was under an enormous strain but wasn't screaming in pain like he had during previous Legilimency attacks. His face contorted in effort and mental tension as he threw all he could at his Occlumency shields.

His emerald green met her vibrant blue and the ephemeral connection took place. Slowly, Harry's effort seemed to ease a bit. After a long moment, the strain in his face eased and he leisurely closed his eyes in relief.

Remus helped Harry to stand up straight as Daphne wrapped her arms around him in concern and relief. Harry gave a long sigh as she

enveloped him from the front and Moony from the back. She could hear Remus mutter, "Damn you to hell Voldemort."

"Amen," was her only response.

"You alright?" she asked after a long moment.

"Actually, I am. A bit knackered, but on the whole I'm more hungry than wiped out. The Occlumency is paying off." He nodded to Remus who had relaxed his embrace. Smiling in return, Remus moved off to talk with Tonks and Bill on the other side of the veranda.

Harry looked around and saw their guests watching with horrified expressions. Harry chuckled at them and asked, "Who's up for a good meal?"

Fred gave a resounding cheer and grabbed Susan. Together, they danced the Tango into the dining room causing the tension to break and the party to resume.

Harry and Daphne followed the group, arm in arm. She looked up at his face and though tired, he was smiling.

Maybe they could win after all.

31 October, 1996 Tuesday

"Hear ye, hear ye. Ye Lords and Lady, Members and proxy-members, take your seats for this twentieth convocation of the ruling Wizengamot of Britannia That Was in the year one thousand, nine hundred and ninety six."

Daphne watched the shuffling and shambling of the members in the rotunda below. Harry and Richard MacMillan were conversing while Susan, Neville and Lord Jones were chatting.

Looking around the room, she saw many of the members glaring in the general direction of the Fifteen. Surely, the assertiveness of the group recently had raised some hackles. The trumping of the Wizengamot body proved to the likes of the Malfoys, Lestranges, Notts and so on that they were not the crème de la crème as they so wanted to be. They didn't seem to like the reminder too much.

A soft tap on her left hand caused Daphne to regard Lady Augusta. They'd taken to sitting together during the convocations and her fondness for the Grande Dame had only grown. The Dowager Lady Longbottom had shown her political acumen on more than one occasion by offering sound advice on the happenings below them.

Two weeks before, she'd teared up when Neville had risen and berated the sponsor of a bill that increased the muggleborn tax on businesses. The young Lord had systematically torn the bill to shreds and motioned for it to be removed from the docket. The Members had rallied to his impassioned cries and the bill was stricken.

Lady Augusta had been gripping Daphne's hand the entire time and at the end applauded her grandson. "He's becoming a good man."

"He always was a good man," Daphne corrected gently. "He's becoming a giant among men."

Lady Augusta had merely smiled and patted the younger woman's hand.

Returning to the present, Daphne watched Dumbledore rise and begin the session. Frowning, she saw the Chief Warlock watching Harry like a hawk for the entire session, the bulk of which was taken up with discussion about the increase in the Auror force.

There was no vote called. Despite a vigorous and somewhat ridiculous criticism of the Auror increase, Harry and the other members of the Fifteen chose to watch the 'debate' while refraining

from participation. Amusing to Daphne, Triton Nott and Ricardo LeStrange let the discussion peter out when they saw that the Fifteen were not rising to the bait. Obviously, the ruling group had not changed their mind from the previous vote so Nott and LeStrange had no hope of a reversal of the expansion of the Law Enforcement agents.

The session was called to a close and when the Chief Warlock's gavel banged on his desk, Daphne helped Lady Augusta to her feet.

"It looks like those people aren't going to let the DMLE issue lie, does it my dear?" Lady Augusta opined in a soft voice.

"No, my Lady. It doesn't."

Lady Augusta hooked her arm through Daphne's and the younger woman assisted the older down the stairs to the main chamber. Approaching Harry and the other Fifteen, Lady Augusta patted Daphne on the arm and said, "I'll just have a seat here, dear. Please tell Neville that I'm here and when he's ready, we'll head home."

With a smile, Daphne moved off just as she saw Albus Dumbledore move toward Harry wearing a solemn expression. She pulled up next to Harry and tapped his hand. When he turned to her she nodded in the direction of the approaching Headmaster. He glanced in the direction and registered the approach of the elderly man. His face hardening, he gave her a small kiss on the forehead and muttered, "Thanks, love."

"My Lord, how are you and your lovely wife this fine day?"

"We are well, Chief Warlock. Yourself?"

"I am well, thank you. Might I have a word with you?"

Frowning, Daphne took Harry's proffered arm and they followed

Dumbledore into a side room. They seated themselves around a round table and the Potters silently waited for Dumbledore to begin.

"My Lord, I am concerned about some reports that have reached me."

Daphne rolled her eyes. What a ridiculously dramatic statement that couldn't be more vague if he tried.

Harry concurred when he bit out, "Get to the point, sir."

Sighing, Dumbledore nodded and replied, "I understand you have been participating in raids on Death Eater strongholds."

Harry and Daphne frowned at that. She beat Harry to the punch and asked, "How would you have learned that?"

Dumbledore's eye-twinkle kicked into high gear. "Oh, here and there."

Now she was mad. "Chief Warlock, if you do not answer, not only is this interview at an end, but we will have to petition the Minister over dinner tonight to have you questioned by the Aurors as to your knowledge of classified information."

With narrowed eyes, Harry said, "I do not appreciate your prying, Chief Warlock. If anything, it smacks of espionage. Is there a purpose to all this or are you just showing off what you know?"

Taken aback by the double barreled blast from the Potters, Dumbledore blanched. Recollecting himself with admirable speed, the old man held his hands out in a soothing gesture. "I am no spy. Despite the animosity you hold for me, Harry, you know I am no supporter of Voldemort."

Reluctantly, Harry nodded but then continued, "To follow up my wife's

question, how do you know this information?"

Dumbledore paused and then said, "I am reluctant to reveal my source as they have risked themselves in disclosing this to me."

"Well that's just too bad," Daphne spat, "He ought not to have said anything in the first place. Your little informant should have kept his mouth shut. People get killed when secrets like this leak."

"I will consider this." Dumbledore rumbled

Harry stood and extended his hand to Daphne. "While you consider it, we shall take our leave. Good day."

Daphne smiled at Harry's tactics and took his hand. As she stood, Dumbledore sighed again and said, "Kingsley Shacklebolt."

With a smug smile, Harry asked, "See? That wasn't too hard, was it?"

Dumbledore ignored the sarcasm as the couple retook their seats. "My purpose in meeting with you today is to bring some concerns of mine to your attention."

When Harry and Daphne replied with silence, the old man continued in a somewhat defeated tone. "I am concerned about some of your behavior, Harry."

Harry closed his eyes for a moment, obviously reining in his temper. "As I have told you before, you will address me as 'my Lord' or 'your Lordship'. Now what behavior of mine is any business of yours?"

"On these raids in which you have participated, I understand you have killed."

Daphne gaped at the audacity of the man across the table from her. Harry must have anticipated the question as he merely smiled at the

man and asked a counter question.

"You would have me defeat Voldemort and his Death Eaters without killing them? Only the Aurors should kill? Or are the Death Eaters and their leader only allowed to kill? I'm confused on a few points Chief Warlock. First, how is this any business of yours and second, what are the rules regarding killing? I'm quite curious."

Daphne couldn't help herself; a giggling laugh bubbled up from her belly and rolled out before she could stop it. Harry had a wide smile and turned to her, squeezing her thigh under the table.

Continuing in his defeated tone, Dumbledore explained, "I am merely concerned for your overall well being."

Harry stood and helped Daphne from her chair. Very stiffly, he replied, "Thank you for your concern. Good day."

As they made their way out of the hall en route to the atrium, Daphne became worried about her silent husband. A quick apparition later, they were home and she put her hand on his arm.

"Are you alright?"

He turned to her and smiled, "Yeah. I'm concerned that Shackbolt is talking to Dumbledore about things he ought not to discuss, but I'm Ok otherwise. Annoyed at the old man. Wish he'd just leave me alone. He can take his 'concerns', roll them up, stuff his pipe and smoke them."

Chuckling at the visual, Daphne wrapped her arms around her husband which he reciprocated. After a long minute, she asked, "Does the killing bother you?"

He shook his head and whispered, "Unfortunately, it doesn't." After a considering pause he added, "I'm afraid of what that may mean."

She tightened her hold and told him, "I feel the same way. Maybe it's part of integrating our animal Ka. Maybe it's because we've killed scum who needed a good killing." She pulled back and looked him in the eye, "You aren't going Dark, of that I'm sure."

He ran his hand through her raven tresses before leaning in and softly kissing her. "What would I do without you?"

She smiled impishly and replied, "You'd still be lonely virgin who didn't have much fun."

He laughed and said, "Well, we can't have that, can we?" Scooping her into his arms, he headed for the stairs and the master bedroom, "Come wife, we've some things to discuss."

"Oooh, I like these discussions."

.oOo.

"As you can see, Amelia, we're quite concerned about this leak of information."

A furious Amelia Bones sat at the dinner table. Harry had just recounted the discussion he and Daphne had with the Chief Warlock.

"I agree wholeheartedly, Harry. I'll have Connie in first thing in the morning and then the two of us will have a bit of a chat with Auror Shacklebolt. "

Harry nodded and let the matter drop. Daphne agreed, Shacklebolt's future was none of their business. He'd made his bed, he'd have to lie in it.

It was a quiet meal. Susan was at Green Hills dining with Neville and



Lady Augusta, Phillip was at a friend's house for the week and Evelyn was out to dinner with George Stebbins.

Talk turned to their day and devolved into another politics lesson by Amelia. By nature she wasn't a bossy woman. In fact she was very 'hands-off' in her raising of Susan. Usually, she'd give the girl advice through a story and then let her loose. She firmly believed that experience was the best educator when guidance failed.

All three were laughing as Amelia recounted a rather humorous experience from her Auror days that involved two leprechauns and a quintaped when the fireplace in the Entry Hall roared. Daphne glanced at the clock and saw it was too early for Susan or Evelyn to return and discreetly drew her wand.

She smiled grimly when she noticed her husband and Amelia had done the same.

The pat-pat-pat of rapidly approaching feet told the threesome that the person was running. Amelia came around the table to have some cover as Harry and Daphne spread out. Out of the corner of her eye, Daphne saw Harry Shift to The Tiger and nodded in agreement. A moment later, The Wolf stood there, coiling her muscles for a leaping attack.

A disheveled Connie Hammer ran in the Family Dining Room. She scanned the room, ignoring the five hundred pound tiger and bristling she-wolf. Zeroing in on Amelia she barked, "Gringotts is under attack by a hundred Death Eaters and Voldemort himself is leading the attack!"

"Happy Halloween, Harry," thought Daphne.

A/N

1. I own nothing

2. Yes, muggledad screwed up last chapter. Draco was in Azkaban for the murder of Terry Boot, not roaming the halls of Hogwarts in order to fling offensive slurs at our heroes. I've just wanted for Harry to intimidate the piss out of the Ferret for a while (pun intended). Had a brush of it in Harry and Gabi, and an Animagus version in To Stand Against the Darkness. I just spaced the continuity. Sorry to all. Just suspend your disbelief while reading that part and revel in the moment. I know I did.

3. Thanks to all who have taken the time to vote on my homepage for the next story to be updated. I was stunned that Harry and Gabi had such support. I've been working on it (~9k words for chapter 2) but chapter 2 will be a long one like chapter 1. Don't expect a posting anytime soon, but I am working on it. Also, I have about half of the next chapter of All Because of a Hippogriff done. I've taken to updating the status of the stories on my homepage weekly. If you're curious on the status of a story, check there. My Partners chapters are usually 10k words+. Hippogriff runs 6-8k or better. You all know that the Harry and Gabi chappies are all monsters. Expect that for them all.

4. I am currently re-reading Sunset Over Britain by Bobmin356. It's a wonderful story found on [fanfictionauthors\(dot\)net](http://fanfictionauthors(dot)net). Excellent work by Bob & Alyx. If you haven't read it and its companion piece Sunrise Over Britain, make the time.

## Chapter 13

31 October 1996 Tuesday

"Gringotts is under attack?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Connie Hammer answered. Turning to Amelia, she outlined the situation. "We've recalled all Aurors to Auror Training Camp One which we are using as a staging area." Glancing at her watch she continued, "All Aurors should be there within the next three minutes."

"I've Scrimgeour setting up a plan to neutralize as many of the Death Eater forces as we can." Indicating toward the hallway and the Floo connection, Connie asked, "Shall we?"

Daphne and Harry hurriedly followed the Minister and DMLE head. When Connie glanced back at them and then gave Amelia a questioning glance, Amelia responded, "We need them."

A quick Floo ride later, the four emerged into a large room bustling with activity. Shouts from the more than twenty fireplaces burning green with Floo calls added to the general cacophony. Harry and Daphne followed Amelia and Connie to a large table where Rufus Scrimgeour stood next to a clipboard toting wizard.

"...and find out how many goddamn trolls are there!" the head Auror finished as the foursome approached.

"Rufus, report," Amelia barked.

Surprised, Scrimgeour turned around and said, "Oh, Madam Minister, I didn't see you there." Taking a moment to collect himself, he outlined the situation. "We have approximately seventy five to one hundred persons dressed in Death Eater garb assaulting Diagon Alley. The focus of the attack is Gringotts, but they are burning many of the businesses in that section of the Alley. There are an unknown

number of mountain trolls in the Alley. Apparently, the creatures are screening the body of supposed Death Eaters from the Leaky Cauldron section of the Alley."

"It is known that Lord Voldemort is leading the assault proper. Watkins saw him at the head of the rabble as they strode down the Alley toward the bank. The goblins have brought up all their wards, including the lethal ones. We estimate it will take Lord Voldemort over a week to bring down those defenses."

At this point, Harry and Daphne exchanged a look. She inclined her head toward an unoccupied fireplace and said, "Neville and Susan."

He nodded and turned back to the briefing. Daphne skittered to the fireplace, tossed in the requisite Floo powder and called, "Green Hills!"

Closing her eyes and sticking her head in the green flames, she waited for the spinning sensation to cease before she opened her eyes again. "NEVILLE!" she shouted into the Entry Hall.

A heartbeat later, Neville apparated into the Entry Hall with his wand in hand. A second after he arrived, Susan followed. "You're both needed at Auror Training Camp One. Transfigure your clothes and get over here now."

She backed out of the fireplace and stepped out of the way as first Neville and then Susan tumbled out of the green flames.

Explaining the situation to the other two, Daphne saw that Harry was still at the map table and watching the Head Auror point out items on the map of Diagon Alley.

Tonks sidled up to Neville with Remus looking over her shoulder. Daphne sent the Marauder a quizzical look to which he smiled and shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "Hey, it looked like fun to come!"

The counter attack plan was shaping up in two stages. First, a small group of Aurors would portkey into the Alley in the vicinity of Flourish and Blotts; close enough to the screening troll line to get their attention and hopefully the attention of the Death Eaters behind them.

From there, it was pretty dicey. There were two hundred and fifty Aurors in the staging area waiting to jump. Fifty would portkey in the distraction group, leaving two hundred in the main body. Opposing them was a force of one hundred odd Death Eaters, an unknown number of trolls and Lord Voldemort. Not the best odds. When attacking a force, overwhelming superiority of fire or numbers is desired. Superiority of both fire and numbers is best.

Amelia turned to Harry and said, "You will need to be with the main body attack force. Do not get in the front line, the Aurors will be briefed that you are to personally engage Voldemort and their function is to get you close enough to him." She paused and with a serious expression, asked, "Are you ready for this?"

Harry nodded grimly. Amelia squeezed his shoulder and looked at all the friends gathered, saying, "Godspeed you all."

Tonks led the way to the jump point where over two hundred Aurors were gathered in tight knots around portkeys. Scrimgeour went to a group as well and tucked in tight.

As Amelia and Connie climbed a short stage, Tonks started laughing and pointed. Following her finger, Daphne saw a dozen Aurors placing green orbs the size of cricket balls into satchels that were strapped to their side. Tonks gave a feral grin and explained to all, "Those guys are sappers – explosive experts - and the green orbs are fragmentation explosives. When they detonate, the erumpet fluid explodes something huge and sends shards of sharpened steel in all directions. A cool function they've just developed is the ability to

control the direction of the blast." Tonks' eyes narrowed with malice, "Bastards won't know what hit them."

Connie gave last minute direction to the assembled teams including the orders about Harry and Voldemort. This caused quite a few stares of incredulity at the teenager from the older law enforcement officers. In the end, most shrugged, drew their wand and waited.

Daphne pulled Harry into a brief but intense kiss. So no one else could hear, she whispered, "I love you with all my heart, husband."

He smiled at her and replied, "And I you, wife." After kissing her softly, he smiled and said, "Let's go kill some bad guys."

She smiled back and shook her head in mock exasperation. "It's not 'bad guys' Harry. It's 'perpetrators of illegal activities'."

"Right. Ready?"

Grasping the hoop portkey, she answered, "As I'll ever be."

.oOo.

Ten minutes later they arrived at the mouth of Knockturn Alley. Daphne couldn't see well as their friends were a rank behind the front line. To the right down Diagon Alley was Gringotts, to the left was the Leaky Cauldron.

Just as Neville leaned forward over Harry's shoulder to say something, a series of roars thundered from the left in Diagon Alley.

"Trolls," commented Harry in a blasé tone.

When Daphne raised an eyebrow at him, he smirked and waved a hand at her. "Old hat. Something for an ickle firstie."

"Don't get cocky, it gets you killed."

Daphne and Harry turned to see a woman of middle age standing behind them with a grave expression. Meeting her solemn eyes, Daphne nodded and her light mood evaporated. Her knee gave a slight twinge, forcibly reminding her of Malfoy Manor and the beating they had received there. Seeing movement, she glanced at Neville and saw him rubbing his shoulder. He was obviously remembering as well.

"Let's go!" shouted Scrimgeour from the front of the group.

"He may be a prick, but he's got courage," commented Susan.

Nodding, the Potters advanced out of the alley. The sappers split into two groups, ten to deal with the trolls and the rest to act as a small arms artillery of sorts.

The first fifty or so Aurors were disillusioned to give the group a few extra seconds to flood the alley. Harry and Daphne made the turn into Diagon flanked by Remus and Tonks, Neville and Susan behind them.

All Daphne could see was the ten Aurors in front of her and beyond them a wall of black cloaks.

"Fuck me," she heard Tonks exclaim.

"NOW!" Scrimgeour commanded.

Twenty five fragmentation orbs flew through the air and landed in the midst of the Death Eaters. With a thunderous roar, the orbs exploded. With the Death Eaters falling like dominos, the seventy five disillusioned Aurors simultaneously attacked. Eldritch fire lanced across the distance separating the two forces as a second volley of the deadly orbs flew across the gap.

Behind them, the sound of more explosives detonating mixed with roars from the besieged trolls. The sound of fighting began to percolate up through Daphne's hearing and into her consciousness. Focusing on the Death Eaters in front of them, she blocked out all noises behind her. There was nothing she could do about it, so it didn't matter.

"I love you Harry," she said as she stared to her front.

"With all my heart, Daph," he responded.

The Aurors began to move forward, advancing under the cover of the explosive orbs and the first few ranks of Aurors. The Death Eaters lack of coherent training was showing. In the face of well trained and organized troops, they were being slaughtered. Already forty Death Eaters drained their life's blood on the cobbles of Diagon Alley.

Eyes narrowed, Daphne was suspicious, It can't be this easy.

It wasn't.

A screeching roar sounded from the midst of the Death Eaters. Quickly they parted and for the first time in her life, Daphne laid eyes on a Chimera.

It was terrifying.

Most people laugh at the idea of the Chimera: Head of a lion, body of a goat and tail of a dragon. To see the beast in front of oneself dispels any and all humour in a heartbeat. The lion's head isn't the tawny leonine visage that's seen the world round in pictures and the cinema. It has a black countenance with streaks of blood red running back from its slavering jaw. The glowing red eyes promise death.

The goat body is amazingly muscled. Incredible strength is on



display powering the razor sharp hooves. The short black hair ripples with each flexing underneath the skin. The dragon's tail is mostly reminiscent of the Hungarian Horntail. Long, sinuous and black; it is studded with crimson spikes. At the end was a horn configuration that was reminiscent of a battle axe.

Breathing green fire, the beast stalked toward the attacking Aurors, tearing up cobblestones as it approached. It opened its mouth and sounded a call of despair to its enemies. Where a Phoenix uplifts the righteous and causes the unjust to quail, the Chimera had the opposite effect and it was devastating.

As the front ranks of the Aurors recoiled from the Chimera's call, it swept its tail first right and then left; scattering bodies like toothpicks. The sappers changed the focus of their attack, causing the beast to be bombarded with enough magical high explosive to rival a night's bombing by the Luftwaffe during the Blitz.

Through the dust and smoke, the Chimera sounded its call again.

The next rank of Aurors kept pouring spellfire into the Death Eater ranks. The slaves of Voldemort had been rocked back on their heels by the attack and the Officers wanted to keep their initiative.

Harry cast one Bone Shattering curse after another at the rampaging Chimera until Daphne's hand on his arm stopped him. "What?"

Pointing to her right, she indicated a group of five wizards, "They're casting the Killing curse at the beast and it's not having an effect. Husband your strength for Voldemort; let everyone else deal with the Chimera."

Scowling at her, he finally nodded and returned to pouring spellfire into the massed Death Eaters.

The next minutes felt like hours to Daphne and also like seconds.

The Death Eaters tried to rally three times and each time they fell like corn to the combine. The bodies fell in slow motion, yet the whipping tail and slashing hooves of the Chimera moved like quicksilver – far too fast to track.

The raging Chimera, leaving Daphne, Harry and their friends at the forefront of the attack, had decimated the front four ranks of Aurors.

"Tonks, I love you."

Startled, Daphne looked to her right and saw Remus charging the Chimera after his declaration. A shocked Tonks could only stare at him for a moment before recollecting herself. Seeing Daphne's astonished stare, the young Auror snapped, "Do something useful! Give the man some covering fire, damn your eyes!"

Nodding, Daphne turned back to the front and began a series of Ribbon Cutting curses that dropped groups of Death Eaters. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Remus charge the massive creature. Conjuring as he ran, a five foot long javelin appeared in his hand. Wincing as he dashed toward his quarry, he held the silver coloured weapon high. Sliding left, then right, he slowly advanced on the raging animal. Finally, he was within ten feet of the beast.

Remus took a final shaky breath, cast a quick spell at the ground in front of him and leapt as high as he could.

For a normal wizard, a two foot vertical jump would have been about normal. Being a werewolf, Remus cleared five feet. He still only reached the bottom of the Chimera's jaw. When he landed, though, the Springboard charm he'd cast shot him a good twenty feet in the air.

Daphne grabbed Susan's shoulder and together the women began to rapidly transfigure rubble into cannon balls, razor sharp chain, hundreds of musket balls, saw blades and the like. Harry noticed

their work and began banishing the weapons toward the Death Eaters, grunting as he cast.

Aurors were falling now. The Death Eaters had been rocked back on their heels and the Aurors were going for the throat, but the thugs in black still had some bite. Unforgivables lanced out sporadically from the Death Eater ranks. Interspersed were other lethal curses that weren't so power draining.

The Aurors were working in teams. For every four law enforcement agents that were casting spells, one was shielding – which included conjuring solid walls to block Unforgivables. At this point, Diagon Alley was full of debris and there was a small hill of shattered marble and granite piled up between the two forces.

When Remus broke the ranks and charged the Chimera, both sides paused and stared at him. One of the Auror team leaders had raised his fist in the air and screamed an old Welsh battle cry before following the former Professor.

Charging the Death Eater ranks, the Aurors drew or conjured blades. Daphne knew she was not very good with a sword, but she was fairly deadly with a long dagger. Conjuring the foot and a half long blade for her left hand, she plunged into the mass of black next to her husband. Harry was wielding a short sword in his left hand as he rained death from his wand.

As the two forces collided, Remus landed on the back of the Chimera. With a loud cry, he drove the silver javelin into the base of the beast's skull.

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The scream of pain and rage from the massive Chimera was a physical force that knocked everyone in the Alley flat on the ground.

The beast's tail whipped around and caught Remus in the ribcage throwing him through the air like a rag doll.

"NO!"

Tonks rose and sprinted after her wounded lover. Daphne saw Harry rise and make to follow her but he paused, looking off over Daphne's shoulder. Turning, she saw Lord Voldemort slowly stalking toward her husband.

"Move back, love."

Harry gently pushed Daphne behind him and saw him take a steadying breath.

The subsequent battle was so fast, so violent and so powerful that no one who saw it could accurately describe it afterwards. The Death Eaters counterattacked the Aurors. Daphne, Susan and Neville found themselves protecting Harry's back from attacking Death Eaters. Twice Susan had a clear shot at Voldemort, but couldn't take advantage of it because she was forced to defend from a Death Eater attack.

Voldemort opened with the Killing curse, which Harry dodged.

As the green ribbon of death lanced out at Harry, he was already moving and cast three Bone Shattering curses. One hit Voldemort in the left arm causing the man to scream in pain, shards of bone jutting from his left forearm.

Glaring hatefully at this opponent, Voldemort didn't even bother healing himself. He began a furious assault on Harry, pounding the young lord's shield with curse after curse, driving Harry to his knees. The fusillade continued until Harry couldn't even counterattack.

Desperate to help Harry, Daphne banished a cobblestone at the Dark

Lord. The brick hit Voldemort in his left arm, bringing the man to his knees. Harry rose from the ground, shaking the blood out of his eyes. Seeing his nemesis on the ground, Harry paused.

"Fool," Voldemort ground out.

Whipping his wand over his head in an elongated circle, Voldemort created a windstorm that sucked up the bits of stone and rock that littered the alley. With a wand gesture from the Dark Lord, the rock filled tornado attacked Harry and began to beat him senseless.

Spot apparating, Harry appeared behind his opponent and hit the man in the back with the Asphyxiation curse.

Grasping his throat, Voldemort quickly countered the curse and began to pound Harry with curses again. Summoning rubble and banishing it at his opponent, the Dark Lord began to crumble Harry's defences.

"Lemniscus Diffindo!"

Daphne cast her Ribbon Cutting curse with all the power she could muster. Voldemort's shield flared and then failed. The horizontal pink string of magic continued and with ridiculous ease severed the Dark Lord's right leg at the knee.

Magical exhaustion quickly overcame Daphne. She and Voldemort fell at the same time. As her vision greyed, she saw the Dark Lord reach in his robes to activate a portkey. The last thing she saw before unconsciousness claimed her was Harry panting on the ground, blood trickling from his ears, nose and mouth.

01 November 1996 Wednesday

The same stupid bastard opened the curtains so the sun fell on

Daphne, waking her from a sound sleep.

"Good morning, my Lady," chirped the insanely chipper voice.

Groaning, Daphne rubbed her face. Without opening her eyes, she asked, "Where is my husband?"

Learning her lesson from her last encounter with Lady Potter, the nurse answered, "He's in the bed next to you, my Lady."

"Thank you."

Rolling to her left, Daphne saw Harry lying fast asleep.

"Not again," she murmured.

"How do you feel?" asked a voice from the foot of her bed.

Looking up, she saw George Stebbins with a clipboard in his hand. "Tired," she answered.

Nodding he made a quick note on the file and began waving his wand over Daphne which quickly finished. "Well, you are fit as a fiddle. Your core has recharged nicely and I doubt you'll feel any effects come tomorrow."

"Harry?"

Sighing, George sat on the side of Daphne's bed and set the clipboard down. "Concussion, seven broken ribs, broken left arm, numerous abrasions, internal bleeding. Considering he was going toe-to-toe with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, I'd say he's doing quite well. He's breathing after all."

"He'll be fine, right?"

Giving her a small smile, the Healer patted her on the leg and replied, "He'll be fine. We gave him a massive dose of Skele-gro when he came in yesterday. That's done its job and the internal injuries have all healed as well. You'll both go home tomorrow."

Exhaling her relief, Daphne rubbed her face again. Sitting up, she groaned again. She was definitely sore all over.

"Your mother should be back soon. She went home last night at midnight. I had to nearly drag her out."

Daphne nodded her understanding before going still. Collecting herself, she regarded George with a very serious expression. "Uncle George, I realize that you and Mother are in a relationship." When he opened his mouth to reply, she cut him off with a hand wave. "I approve. You have been good for my mother and I believe she is good for you, as well. However," here her expression darkened, "Don't you hurt her."

George's expression was halfway between serious and amused. "This is a bit of a turnabout, isn't it? The daughter is giving her mother's suitor the warning."

With a slightly abashed expression, Daphne said, "That may be, but I am serious."

"So am I."

"Good, then we shan't have any problems then, shall we? Why don't you come by Rowan Hill for dinner Friday evening?"

Smiling openly, George answered, "I'd like that quite a bit."

"You'd like what?" Evelyn asked as she entered the room.

Turning to her, he answered, "Daphne's invited me to dine on Friday."

Smiling, she placed her hand on George's shoulder and said, "That's good. I think we shall have quite a bit of fun."

Neville and Susan followed Evelyn in the room. Both of their faces brightened seeing Daphne up and awake. Susan came to Daphne's bed and asked, "How are you?"

"Pretty good. I'm tired and sore, but otherwise all right. He," Daphne indicated the still sleeping Harry, "Will be fine as well. Broken bones and whatnot, but nothing serious or long term." When Susan gave a relieved sigh, Daphne asked, "What about Remus and Tonks?"

Neville answered. "Remus is in the next room. He was pretty mashed up; the Chimera wasn't too happy to die and broke him up in return. Fortunately, Tonks got to him quickly and portkeyed him here."

Daphne nodded and threw back the sheets on her bed. Reaching for a dressing gown that Dobby must have brought, she stood. "Neville, stay here in case Harry wakes. I'll be right back."

Susan helped her stand and make her way next door. She didn't try to stop her friend for she understood. A woman of her house needed her and Daphne was obligated to help. Ties of duty and love bound Daphne to the young Metamorph. Tonks was quickly becoming a quirky older sister and Daphne wanted to help her in her time of need. So too did Susan.

Pushing the door open, Daphne saw Tonks leaning back in her chair, staring at the sleeping Remus. Without moving, Tonks greeted the two. "Wotcher, Daph, Susan."

"How are you, Tonks?"

Snorting in derision, "I'm fine. I was on the battlefield for five minutes. Remus is broken like a twig, though."



Frowning at Tonks' tone, Daphne exchanged a look with Susan. "How is he?"

"Healing. They dosed him with what seemed like a quart of Skele-gro before pouring a bloody vat of other potions down his throat." Tonks' hands went to her face as she sobbed, "That fucking Chimera. One of its spikes pierced his heart. One more minute and he'd have died."

The two young women approached the sobbing Auror and gingerly wrapped her in a hug. Holding on to the two, Tonks let her fear, sorrow and despair pour out of her.

After a few minutes, her cries softened until they were just snuffles. "Thanks."

Rubbing the older woman's back, Susan answered, "No problem. It's what friends do."

Giving Susan a watery smile, Tonks nodded.

The Healer entered the room, performing her morning rounds. Apparently, Remus and Harry were in similar straights and both had similar prognoses: Full recovery after rest.

After sitting with Tonks for an hour, Daphne said, "I think I need to get back in bed for a bit."

Neville was sitting in a chair next to Evelyn. They both were reading books; Neville had *Runes, A Beginner's Reader* while Evelyn was reading *The Divine Comedy* by Dante.

"How's Tonks?" asked Neville.

Shrugging, Daphne settled into her bed and replied, "As good as she can be. She had a good cry and I think that helped. Remus is going

to be Ok, that's what she's grasping for her sanity. With her father having been murdered, I think she'd go around the twist if she lost Remus. Susan is going to call Andromeda and ask if she would come sit with her for a bit."

Neville nodded at the news. They all turned when Harry groaned and began smacking his lips. "That had to have been the most disgusting potion on the planet," he mumbled.

"Hey, mate," Neville greeted him. "How are you?"

Blinking, Harry fumbled on the nightstand for his glasses. Putting them on, he looked around the room before focusing on Daphne. "Sore as hell, Nev. How's Remus?"

Daphne outlined Moony's status before telling Harry about his own health. As the general conversation picked up, Harry became quiet and seemed to pull into himself. After Evelyn excused herself to return to Phillip, Daphne watched her husband closely and saw the moment that he made his resolve. He expanded out of himself again and set his jaw in a determined pose that made her want to stand up and cheer.

Quirking her eyebrow at him in an unspoken question, Daphne waited. He smiled at her and winked. Slowly the smile faded until his expression was deadly serious. The talk in the room petered out and Harry explained.

"Voldemort treated me like a rag doll. We got in two lucky shots on him and another that he countered immediately. I have to be better." Pausing, he reiterated forcefully, "I will be better. Next time, he dies."

02 November 1996 Thursday

Amelia Bones entered their hospital room just as Harry finished dressing.

"Ah, good, I've caught up to you both." Settling on the visitor's chair, she indicated to Harry's bed. After Daphne settled next to her husband, Amelia said, "I've nominated the two of you for the Order of Merlin Second Class."

Harry scowled and was about to retort when Daphne quelled him with a hand on his arm. Instead, she asked, "Who else is being honoured?"

"There will be an automatic Third Class awarded to all those who perished or were wounded."

Nodding absently, Daphne followed up. "And Remus...?"

Amelia looked away and Harry pounced. "I won't accept a bucket of spit if Remus doesn't at least get a Second Class. He killed a Chimera single handedly and almost died for it!"

"Harry, Remus is a good man but the fact is that he's a werewolf..."

"Get out," Harry interrupted.

Daphne was stunned. She liked Amelia but the Minister wasn't even making an effort to do the right thing by Remus.

Shocked, Amelia regarded the irate Lord Potter for a long moment. She seemed to sag into herself and wiped her face with a tired hand.

"I thought you were a better person, Amelia. Perhaps I was wrong."

This comment from Harry was like a physical blow to the Minister. Recoiling in shock was followed by her face twisting in anger. "Listen to me Harry Potter," she spat. "I couldn't put him in for any award and get it through the voting process and you know it well!"

"You could try."

Now her face fell in obvious shame. Nodding at the truth of the statement, she looked at glaring Potters and whispered, "You're right, I could."

In a frigid tone, Daphne asked, "Will you?"

Amelia hesitated and then nodded.

Daphne smiled and then offered an olive branch. "Wait a few days, we'll get Weasley the younger working on whipping the press into a fervour of support for Remus."

"Good idea," replied a chastised Amelia. After a wry smile, she met their eyes with a bit of confidence and said, "You do know, that I allow very few people on the planet to speak to me as you two just did."

Harry gave a small smile of his own and replied, "Only because we were right."

Nodding again, Amelia rose, hesitated and then approached Harry. Looking him in the eye, she said, "You have grown strong, Harry. I'm very proud of you." With that, she embraced him.

Turning to Daphne, she added, "And he wouldn't be the man he is without you." After embracing Daphne, she left with a small wave.

Harry pulled Daphne to him. As she snuggled into his arms, she heard him mutter into her hair, "I would be nothing without you. You've saved me."

"And you me."

At that moment, the door opened again. The Potters looked over and saw Remus Lupin enter, his eyes red. He walked over to the still

cuddling couple and embraced them both. Tonks followed her man in and joined the family hug.

After a long minute, they all released each other. Daphne wiped her face and asked, "So, I guess you heard all that?"

"Yeah. I'm touched that the two of you did that." Shaking his head, he clarified, "Not because of the award, though that would be nice. It's because you two obviously care enough about me to make that stand to Amelia. Thank you."

Daphne smiled and embraced Remus gently. Harry patted the last true Marauder on the shoulder and murmured, "I couldn't do any less for you."

As the foursome made their way to the fireplaces to Floo home, Remus said, "Don't be too hard on Amelia. She's a good woman who was blindsided by her own mild prejudice and a sense of political inertia. It wasn't personal and I don't take it as such."

Daphne nodded in agreement and turned to Harry. After a long moment's thought, he too nodded in assent.

Remus smiled softly for a moment. His face hardened and he said, "I think we need to step up our efforts at finding a way to banish Voldemort once and for all." He paused and then continued, "Harry, I know how much you dislike the Headmaster, but we might want to consider bringing him in to the research effort. Despite his behaviour, he is brilliant, with an unmatched life experience and has the entirety of Hogwarts at his disposal."

Daphne was impressed. No one brought up Dumbledore to Harry and here Remus was advising Harry to bring the man into his council. Even more impressive was Harry's reaction.

"I'll think about it Remus. You make good points and if I can't set

aside my pride to finish Snake Lips then I have a very serious problem, eh?" He smiled and gave Remus a friendly pat on his shoulder.

Smiling, Daphne hooked her arm through Harry's and addressed the group with a feeling of hope that was bubbling up from deep inside her. "Come on, let's go home for lunch. Dobby's supposed to be creating quite the masterpiece for our return."

04 November 1996 Saturday

Daphne wiped the grime off the table and sat down, a towering stack of books next to her.

"This is so disgusting," she murmured. Drawing her wand, she began to cast Cleaning charms on the table, chairs, wall, floor...anything she could see, really. After she finished, she cast a few Air Freshening charms and opened every window she could find. Briskly wiping her hands on a conjured towel, she joined Hermione, Bill, Susan, Harry and Neville at the table.

"Feel better?" her husband asked.

"Much, thank you."

Grabbing the top book off the pile, she began her hunting for a spell or series of spells they could use to banish Voldemort. Remus had been attempting to wade through the Black family library by himself, but with over five thousand books, it would have taken him a year. Hopefully, the six of them would make quicker headway.

Later that evening, Harry jokingly told Daphne he was in awe of 'the ladies' as he called Susan, Hermione and Daphne. "The three of you just chew up and spit out books. For every one book Neville, Bill and I looked over, you three would tear apart three or four." Poking her in the ribs, he joked, "It makes a guy feel pretty insignificant, you know."

She sighed in mock-condescension, "One of the side effects of being male, I'm afraid."

They'd decided to record any generally useful spells while they went, so each had a long scroll of parchment and a few quills. The occasional squeak-squeak of the quills was the only sound for quite a while.

Susan leaned back and rubbed her eyes. "Harry, where's the Black family grimoire?"

With a blank expression, he plead ignorance. "I have no idea."

The others looked up from their books. "That's a great idea Susan," Hermione put in. Turning to her best friend, she said, "You should find it. I bet a spell like we're looking for would probably be in the grimoire. Since you're Lord Black, you'd be the only one able to read it."

Sighing at the prospect of untold hours wading through dirty, dusty, disgusting books, Harry pushed back from the table and stood up.

A tinkle of laughter came from Hermione, Susan and Daphne. With a twinkle in her eye, Hermione asked, "Are you a wizard or what?"

Rolling his eyes, he gave Hermione the bird before casting, "Accio Black family grimoire!"

When no book came flying through the air, he frowned. "Love, there was a rattling from over here," Daphne indicated as she stood and walked over to a set of shelves.

The two of them hunted for the book, while everyone else continued to cull through their own tomes. After five separate Summoning charms by Harry, he eventually called out "Aha! Found you!"

Daphne smirked at her husband when his face fell. The book was five inches thick and when he opened it, she heard him mutter, "Good gods, the print is tiny!"

The others chuckled as he started reading.

06 November 1996 Monday

"You know that Voldemort will try and crash the party," Tonks stated in a matter of fact voice.

Daphne scowled and looked out the window. "Yeah, we know."

The award ceremony and banquet for the Order of Merlin recipients was scheduled for that evening. Harry was at Gringotts, arranging for a series of vaults to be set up for support of BP Charities. Before he'd left, Tonks had begun to pester the Potters about security for the night's festivities. Harry had just shrugged and responded, "Ask Amelia," before he jumped in the fireplace and the Floo whisked him away.

Trying to divert her friend, Daphne asked, "How's Remus?"

Eyes narrowing, Tonks replied, "He's completely healed and screwing my brains out on a regular basis. Don't change the subject, what's on for security tonight?"

"Quite a bit. If you don't know by now, you shouldn't know. This isn't new, Tonks!" Daphne's temper had been short all day and Tonks' pestering had frazzled her to no end.

"You know better than any of us how tight-lipped security plans are nowadays. The Minister will be there. The entirety of the Fifteen will be there. Harry will be there. Dumbledore will be there. The entire 'Who's Who' of the magical world will be there and Amelia has



brought Mad-Eye Moody out of retirement to oversee the entire event."

Tonks shivered at the idea of Mad-Eye running security for an event. "I fully expect everyone will be poked, prodded and otherwise violated in an intimate manner using various dark detectors during security checks this evening."

Daphne nodded with a grim smile. Tonks gave a big sigh and gave the younger woman a hug. "I'm scared."

Daphne sniffed and nodded in agreement. "Me, too."

"He's going to come for our men and I can't lose Remus or Harry." Violently wiping away her tears, Tonks spat, "I can handle him coming for me, but leave my wolf alone."

Daphne smiled at the endearment. "I agree," she softly agreed.

"Ok, enough of this crap. Let's get dressed so our men want to ravish us and we'll never show at this daft to-do tonight." Daphne laughed as Tonks pulled her off the sofa.

They linked arms and headed for the stairs. With a hint of a smirk, Tonks asked, "Maybe I'll make my boobs as big as watermelons. What do you think? Tres sexy?"

Daphne could only chuckle and shake her head in response.

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"Ah, Lord Potter, Lady Potter, good evening."

"My Lord, I understand that you are looking for promising business ventures to back."

"Oh, Lady Potter, your robes are divine, you must tell me where you acquired them."

"Such a distinction at your a young age. I'm sure your parents would be proud, my Lord."

"Lady Potter, I understand that you shall be heading the new BP Charities Group. I think it's wonderful that women today find useful pursuits, don't you?"

And so it went.

An hour later, a grateful Harry shook Neville's hand and bowed over Susan's gloved hand. He shook his head in amused disbelief, sporting a broad smile. Daphne returned the motions and the Orphans closed ranks to keep out the unwanted for a moment of peace.

"Nev, is it always this bad?"

The sandy-haired peer smiled through his drink and shook his head. "Not really." After waiting a beat, he and Susan started laughing. "Harry it will always be like this. We're four of the richest people in magical Europe, control four of the Fifteen, you're 'the Boy-Who-Lived' and you're married to the second most beautiful woman in Britain."

Susan beamed at her boyfriend and whispered a little something to him, which caused the Longbottom of Longbottom to blush a bright burgundy. His face matched his robes quite well.

"I don't want to know," Daphne declared in mock seriousness.

Susan linked her arm through Neville's and smirked at her friend. "Good, 'cause you have yours, this one is all mine."

The foursome laughed again as Percy Weasley took to the podium and asked everyone to take their seats so the presentation could begin.

They all made their way to the large table next to the podium that was reserved for the awardees and the survivors of awardees. Daphne's mood was quickly dampened when she noticed the number of men and women dressed in solid black robes who were sitting at the table. Young children, the sight of which broke Daphne's heart, accompanied a few of the now single parents. One woman had tears running down her face as she embraced and comforted her son. "It's all right Johnny, Mummy's here. Mummy's here."

Daphne's grip on Harry's hand increased and she felt his eyes on her. Looking up at him, she saw the same sorrow etched on his features that was pouring out of her heart. "How many died?" she asked.

"Fifty seven. One hundred and twelve wounded," came from behind them.

Daphne turned to see Remus standing behind them, Tonks at his side. He approached the Potters and put an arm around each. "Come on, family needs to sit together at times like this."

After everyone settled in, Amelia Bones took the podium and gave a short speech on the need to recognize bravery on difficult times.

"...For these are difficult times. A lunatic wizard is attempting to impose his deranged worldview on the rest of us in a most violent fashion. The men and women we recognize this evening stood tall in a time of trial and were accounted in the side of the light. They have earned this recognition. They have earned our respect and honour."

At this point, Percy retook the podium and read out a general award description for all those wounded or killed. The press was alternately calling the battle 'The Chimera Battle' or 'The Battle for Gringotts'.

The Goblins didn't care for the latter tag much, they knew their facility was untouchable and everything that took place outside their wards was so much stuff and nonsense to them. Percy merely referred to 'the engagement between Ministry forces and those that support the insurrectionist Dark Lord that took place in Diagon Alley on 31 October 1996'.

The room was completely silent as the widows and widowers approached Amelia. Each was handed a framed copy of the award after the appropriate medal was draped around their neck. Most of the bereaved were moving in automatic. The tension was high and the crowd almost burst into tears when a young girl by the name of Jennifer Collins asked her mother, "Mummy, can Daddy come home now?"

Sitting next to Daphne, Harry scrubbed his face with empty hands. Recognizing his distress, she gently rubbed his back as she derived some comfort from comforting her husband. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw quite a few couples doing the same.

Daphne was called up for her award. With Amelia, they'd debated the pros and cons of the awardees being allowed to give a speech and they'd concluded that no speech was probably the best bet. Especially when Remus got his Order of Merlin, Second Class.

When Percy read the bit about 'seriously wounding the Dark Lord so that he lost his right leg', a large portion of the crowd burst into furious applause. Daphne kept her face neutral until the reading of the award was finished. Amelia placed the medal over Daphne's neck and with a smile for the photographer, presented Lady Potter with a framed copy of the award signed by the Minister and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. After the very bright flashes ceased, Daphne smiled to the audience and moved to her seat.

Looking around the room, she saw Aurors with their wands drawn. Harry, Remus, Neville, Susan and Tonks shot to their feet, drawing

their wands as they moved.

The world moved into slow motion as Daphne dove. She'd heard nothing. Seen nothing. However, every sense she had was screaming at her; DANGER!

As she landed and began to roll, Daphne drew her wand and disillusioned herself. This skill was something that Rodger Young had drilled them on mercilessly. He'd cast Stinging hex after Stinging hex at them until he couldn't find them. Quite a motivator.

The now disillusioned Daphne Potter rolled under a table and tried to get into a crouch. Cursing in silence, she had to rip the hem of her dress in order to move better. Praying that she would see her attackers before they saw her, she crouched and poked her head over the table.

Part of her had to suppress laughter quite viciously.

A huge Tiger and Bear were pinning Ricardo Lestrangle and Triton Nott to the floor of the dining hall. Three dozen Aurors were binding the unconscious forms of a twelve other persons. There was one fire burning toward the back of the hall, but no one was hurt.

Seeing Victoria Abbott, Daphne released the Disillusionment charm on herself and moved to her friend. The distressed woman saw Daphne approach and gave a sharp cry before engulfing the raven-haired young woman in a relieved hug.

After a long squeeze, Victoria pulled back and scolded, "Don't you do that again! You scared the life out of me!"

Daphne gave a small smile and shrugged. "What happened? I didn't see anything."

Giving her younger friend one last glare, Victoria turned back to the

room. Pointing to the now bound Lestrangle and Nott, she explained. "Those two stood during the photographs and drew their wands. Just as you started to head to your table, they began to cast at you. The others stood at that point and began to cast at the awardees table. I assume they were aiming at Harry, Neville, or Susan."

"Or Remus," Daphne added in an undertone.

After a moment to process the statement, Victoria nodded in agreement. "Or your friend Remus, indeed. Anyway, the Aurors stunned and bound the others in a heartbeat. I think they were stationed in the room under invisibility cloaks or whatnot. Your boys," she said teasingly while pointing at the now un-transformed Harry and Neville, "Turned into great beasts and trounced the stupid bastards over there."

Shaking her head, Daphne muttered, "What were they thinking? Did they really think they could getaway with this?"

"Probably. They've been running roughshod over Britain for the last twenty years or so. They've been performing acts of horror and never been prosecuted. In their delusional worlds, why would anyone stop them now?"

Huffing in indignation, Daphne answered, "Because the light is strong enough to fight back now." After a pause, she added, "And has the will to fight back."

Victoria patted her friend on the shoulder and nodded. Daphne turned and saw a worried Harry and Neville approaching. Taking her in his arms, Harry asked, "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, sorry I didn't get up fast enough to help. Damn robes..."

Rolling his eyes, he chuckled, "Don't worry about it. When Neville and I Shifted and charged Lestrangle and Nott, I think they both shat

themselves. Tonks recommended to the arresting Aurors that they sanitize the prisoners before incarceration."

Daphne laughed in response and saw Susan walking up. "Auntie says they're going to cancel the rest of the presentations. I have Remus' and ours. Let's get out of here."

As they moved toward the Atrium to apparate home, Daphne heard Neville say to Harry, "This doesn't seem like a Voldemort job, does it?"

Harry shook his head. "It doesn't. Too ridiculous. The hitters had no chance to hit their target and no chance to get away. Voldemort would have at least arranged so that the hitter could get a shot at the target."

"I'm thinking a bunch of pureblood idiots are going to Azkaban for quite a while for being stupid."

"I'm thinking the same."

08 November 1996 Wednesday

Daphne and Harry were talking a stroll through the woods before dinner. The weather had definitely turned colder and the winds off the bay had a bite to them. Snuggling into the collar of her standard issue Royal Navy peacoat, Daphne gave Harry's hand a squeeze.

Both of them preferred coats to warming charms. Except her hands. All her gloves had warming charms; nothing was worse than cold hands.

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

"I love you."

He turned to her, beaming. "You were thinking about me?"

With a quizzical smile, she answered, "Is that so hard to believe?"

Shrugging, he took her in his arms. She turned so they could both look through the trees and over the bay. As he leaned back onto a boulder, they both sighed. The last few days had been very stressful.

First off, Amelia had turned the DMLE into overdrive. The memory of Harry's horrific night in the graveyard of Little Hangleton had kicked over a hornet's nest of activity. On the day after the award ceremony, the Aurors had conducted twenty raids, apprehending nine extremely stupid Death Eaters.

"I don't know why they thought they wouldn't get arrested," Amelia wondered out loud at breakfast this morning. "They were known to be supporters of Voldemort. After Diagon Alley and the award ceremony, they had to know we'd come for them."

"Fudge wouldn't have," Daphne commented.

"True."

"So who did you pick up?" Susan asked between bites of bacon.

Tapping the table hoping to jog her memory, Amelia had to resort to the old reliable and took a long draught of her tea. "Let's see...Goyle, Macnair – what a moron. He had the gall to claim that he was an undercover spy of the ministry. Er...Rookwood from the Department of Mysteries, he was a big surprise for me. I didn't expect to pick him up. Apparently he was stopping by to see his family for a night when we came knocking. Fortunate."

Daphne's stomach flipped. It was easy to demonize the enemy. Dehumanizing them made it much easier to kill them. Augustus Rookwood had a wife and children, though. That fact didn't make him



any less of a Death Eater who probably had performed heinous acts. Still, a little boy or girl would be wondering where daddy was this evening.

"Quite a few recent Hogwarts graduates, also. Some of the older Death Eaters rolled over and gave up names of newer additions to the ranks. Adrian Pucey was the big fish. You know, heir to the publishing house firm." Daphne's sense of unease vanished at that name. She'd known that bastard Pucey quite well. He'd decided that Daphne was pretty enough for him during her second year and would 'allow her to take care of some of his needs'. She had cast her first Reductor curse at another human being that night. Pucey had been in the hospital wing for three weeks. Not many Slytherins had tested her after that.

"So where are you going to gaol them with Azkaban having become a large pile of gravel?" Harry asked.

Amelia had a mischievous smile and responded, "We actually came up with the idea from you, my Lord Potter."

Harry groaned and rolled his eyes. "What'd I do now?"

Amelia got the idea listening to Harry recount the second task of the ill-fated Triwizard Tournament. "We're going to use a modified Stasis charm on all the prisoners. They will not need to eat, sleep or even breath and they will be unable to move outside of blinking their eyes. However, they will be conscious and aware of their surroundings. Then, we shall make them immune to scrying, summoning and any other retrieval method. When that is complete, we are going to sink them to the bottom of the North Sea."

Amelia grinned when she saw the expressions around the table. Neville, in particular, looked extraordinarily funny.

"The Office for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures

contacted the merpeople down there and they agreed to mind our prisoners. It's amazing the wards that are specific to underwater. We're providing them under-the-table recognition in return for their minding the prisoners. Once the war is over, we shall go public on the new and improved imprisoning system. I foresee having to shift the location every so often. I know there is a large mer-village in the Irish Sea."

The other situation causing increases in stomach acid had been the investigation of Kingsley Shacklebolt.

After their discussion regarding the prisoners, Amelia cocked a crooked eyebrow at Harry. "Harry, can you two be at my office around ten?"

"Sure, why?"

With a grimace, Amelia looked down at her plate as she viciously forked some eggs. "We need to have a round-robin discussion about the illustrious Kingsley Shacklebolt."

.oOo.

Daphne and Harry were dressed well, but not flashy. Strange she mused to herself. I would have never dressed this well on a regular basis had we not married. Neither would he for that matter. Shrugging to herself, she dismissed the observation about their lifestyle and followed her husband into the Minister's office.

Seated at the head of a rectangular conference table was Amelia Bones. On her right was a red-faced Connie Hammer and on the Minister's left was an equally red-faced Rufus Scrimgeour. Both the old-hand law enforcement officers were glaring at the end of the table where Albus Dumbledore sat, appearing as placid as a mountain lake.

Standing next to Connie was a shamefaced Kingsley Shacklebolt. He was avoiding all gazes in the room and looked to the floor most of the time.

A dicta-quill was set up and recording on a side table. Daphne could see that it had already taken quite a bit of notes.

Amelia indicated the seats next to Scrimgeour, so the Potters sat in silence. Scrimgeour and Hammer both gave Harry and Daphne respectful nods of greeting. It seemed that the action on Halloween night established both their bona fides as able fighters.

"Lord and Lady Potter, than you for coming."

"It is our pleasure Minister. How can my wife and I be of service?" Harry replied smoothly. Daphne smiled on the inside, he was really adopting the mannerisms and etiquette that was required of Potter and Black.

"Would you please recount the conversation you had with the Chief Warlock after the Wizengamot convocation on 31 October?"

In response, Daphne asked, "Would it be easier if we provided a memory that all could watch in a presentation pensieve?"

Amelia looked around, seeing no objection, she answered, "That would be most beneficial, thank you my Lady. Rufus, if you would please?"

Scrimgeour nodded and limped over to a cabinet, retrieving a large stone bowl. Daphne placed her memory in the device after which Scrimgeour started the memory playing above the bowl.

After the five minute memory had played out, Amelia asked, "Lord Potter, does this memory agree with your own recollection of the conversation?"

"Yes, Minister. It does."

Nodding to herself, Amelia turned to Dumbledore and glared. "Chief Warlock, does the memory we just viewed agree with your recollection of the event?"

Softly, Dumbledore replied, "Unfortunately, it does."

Daphne's head snapped toward the old man. Glaring at him for his implied slight, she barely heard Amelia continue. "Thank you." Turning to Shacklebolt, she glared, "Auror Shacklebolt, do you have anything to say that may explain what appears to be an egregious classified information leak?"

Kingsley pursed his lips, obviously weighing the pros and cons of commenting. The wrong move and he would be discharged with prejudice, not a winning recommendation on one's CV.

"I made a poor choice, Madam Minister. When asked for information I knew I ought not to disclose, I choose poorly and disclosed that information to a person who I knew ought not to be made aware of said information."

Daphne raised her eyebrows in surprise. He's throwing Dumbledore under the bus. I don't think that's ever happened to the old man. Glancing to her left, Daphne's surmises were confirmed at the look of shock on the aged Headmaster's face.

Slightly smiling, she heard Shacklebolt continue. "I am aware that the repercussions of my acts are immediate discharge with the possibility of criminal charges that could lead to a fine and imprisonment. I am ashamed to say that I deserve the punishment that you, Director Hammer and Head Auror Scrimgeour mete out."

Daphne's smirk broadened slightly. The Auror was attempting to play

to every one of Amelia's Hufflepuff sensibilities. I wonder if he was a Slytherin at school. He does this quite well.

Amelia was a Hufflepuff, true. She was also a hard-nosed old Auror who was flanked by two other hard-nosed old Aurors. "Yes, you do deserve those punishments Auror Shacklebolt."

Glaring at the man, she pointed her finger and lost her considerable temper. "But we're in the middle of a goddam war and I need every wand in the streets that I can get! What the hell were you thinking Kingsley?"

Taking a deep breath, she looked at the paperwork in front of her and spat, "Demotion one grade, removal from Auror Group Captain Status and two years probation. Now get the hell out of my office!"

With a murmured, "Thank you ma'am," the now thoroughly chastened former member of the Order of the Phoenix rushed from the room.

After the door closed, Amelia turned her frigid glare on Dumbledore. To the man's credit, he didn't flinch. After facing Grindlewald and Voldemort, Amelia Bones probably wasn't that scary.

"Shut down your club. You've corrupted and ruined the career of one of my best Aurors. I'm neither Cornelius Fudge nor his predecessor. Your watchdog group isn't needed. Shut it down or I will do it for you."

Expressionless, Dumbledore gazed at her for a long moment. Finally, he blinked and then gave a curt nod. Making to stand, he asked, "Is there anything else, Madam Minister?"

"No, you may go. Thank you for being prompt this morning."

Daphne had to cough into her hand to avoid laughing at the condescending dismissal from Amelia. Harry was rubbing his cheek,

but the smile still leaked through.

.oOo.

10 November 1996 Friday

"Mum, Harry and I have been talking about Stori."

Evelyn looked up from her book and frowned at her daughter. "What about her? Is she alright?"

Daphne held out her hand in a soothing gesture and sat next to her mother. "As far as I know, she's fine. We're just concerned about her, that's all."

Marking her place in her book, Evelyn placed it on the end table and sighed. Looking out the window to the sheeting rain, Daphne's mother nodded and affirmed, "So am I."

Patting Daphne's knee, she continued, "Not because she's in Slytherin house so much, more so because she's away from here. From all of Harry's stories and the ones that I can only assume that you won't tell me," Daphne scowled a bit at her mother's inference, "I am very close to pulling her home until the unpleasantness passes."

Daphne shook her head at her mother's euphemism. "I am fully in support of bringing her home. It was Harry that brought it up to me in the first place."

Evelyn smiled, "Really? That's nice. Harry's had such a horrid family life up until now, it's good to see him reaching out and caring for Stori and Phillip." Leaning in to her daughter, Evelyn said in a conspirator's whisper, "You do know that Phillip worships the ground that your Harry walks on, don't you?"

Daphne smiled back and nodded. "So we go and fetch her

tomorrow?"

After a moment's contemplation, Evelyn nodded. With a sad expression, she agreed, "Yes. I do wish it wasn't necessary, though. As your sister and Harry's sister-in-law, she's a real target. I just don't trust Hogwarts to keep her safe." Turning back to Daphne she asked, "Can you ask Professors Dubois and Young if they would tutor your sister as well?"

"I will. Knowing them, they'll jump at the chance. They love to teach bright people and Stori is sharp as a whip."

"Thank you. We'll fetch her first thing after breakfast."

A/N

1. I own nothing. Thanks to all who have taken the time to leave a review, I appreciate it.

2. A very cool story I've been reading is *The Skitterleap*. It's a very AU HP story about which I won't tell you the plot. Set aside Hogwarts and all your preconceived notions of HP FF. The author does a wonderful job of keeping some of the actors in character while others are delightfully different. A brilliant weaving of adventure, suspense, hints of romance and above all, a questioning of personal motives by our hero; Oberleutnant Harry Potter, soldier of Grindewald's Third Reich. Check it out.

3. Again, I've taken to updating the status of the stories on my homepage weekly. If you're curious on the status of a story, check there.

4. CV = Curriculum Vitae or to the (us) Yankee heathens, a resume.

## Chapter 14

13 November 1996 Monday

Harry had been pushing himself harder than Daphne had ever seen. Since they'd moved to Rowan Hill, he had studied hard and long. Eight to ten hours a day was the norm for him. Daphne had worried about him, but he seemed to be happy and showed no signs of burning out.

Once he got back on his feet after his encounter with Voldemort in Diagon Alley, he ate, slept, occasionally made love to her, but most of all he studied, read and practiced. He snapped at her, their family, their friends and even Dobby. The dark circles under his eyes belied his continued response of "I'm fine," to every question about his current state.

"Susan, do you have time to chat?"

"Sure. Let's go for a walk, the rain has finally let up."

Donning their jackets, hats and gloves, the two young women set out in the late afternoon sun. They wound their way up into the hills and deep in the woods in silence. Daphne counted her blessings that it was a comfortable silence. She hadn't really realized how close she had grown to Susan Bones and upon further introspection found the young redhead to be very dear to her.

"I'm worried about Harry."

Susan nodded, "He's pushing himself pretty hard."

"Yeah. I want to tell him he's pushing too hard, but what do I say? 'I know you have to face the darkest wizard in a score of centuries, but you're pushing yourself too hard. You need to play some Quidditch?' It sounds ridiculous in my head and when I say it out loud it's even



worse." She slowly shook her head before summing up, "But my heart sees him and shouts out 'Slow Down!'."

In a low tone, she said, "He sleeps three, maybe four hours a night. You've seen him shovel down his meals before retuning to the library."

Susan was silent as they continued their trek. They stopped at a beautiful overlook and admired the valley that they'd just traversed. "Why don't you just tell Harry what you just told me? It makes sense to me. He's not an idiot. If you'd like, I'll talk to Neville and if he agrees – and I think he does – maybe the three of us can talk to him. You know, concerned loved ones and all that."

Daphne nodded absently. She liked the idea of support when she talked to Harry. Their relationship had been so easy so far. Sure, they'd squabbled a bit, but it passed within minutes. Literally. Then they'd make love for what seemed like a blissful eternity.

This was hard, though.

She was afraid of angering him. She was afraid of driving him away. She was afraid of losing his love. It was the most important thing in her life and she was terrified of losing him. Most of the time, Daphne was a very secure, confident young woman.

Somehow, it felt traitorous to feel this way, much less to act on it.

Harry's love for her was a nebulous issue. She never doubted him as a person. She had the utmost respect and confidence in him. Maybe it was an after effect of her relationship with her father, but she had an irrational feeling of waiting for the other shoe to drop. She was terrified that he'd walk in the room one day and tell her to leave as he didn't love her anymore.

"I'm on his side. I'll always be on his side. I don't want him to doubt

that for a moment and that's why I'm having these thoughts in the first place, because I love him."

Susan hooked her arm in Daphne's and pulled her friend close. "We all love Harry. The four of us are family and we love each other. I've seen it and you've seen it. Even though Neville is a guy, I'm sure he's seen it. Harry is doing this because he loves us all so much his heart must feel like bursting. He wants to protect us. I think if we tell him what we see, he'll end up seeing the situation from our point of view."

Daphne gave her friend a mock-sneer, "You are such a bloody Hufflepuff."

Susan laughed, "And you are such a bloody Slytherin." The laughter fell away and Susan advised, "Daphne, don't try to manipulate Harry into doing what you want. He'll smell it a mile away. You saw what he's done to the Headmaster because of his manipulations."

Susan let that tidbit settle in for a long moment before continuing, "I really think that Harry will respond best when we put our cards on the table and are brutally honest with him. Warts and all, if you catch my drift."

Daphne nodded her head and walked on, her fingers beating a tattoo on her crossed arms.

15 November 1996 Wednesday

Dinner at Rowan Hill was a decidedly domestic event this evening. Harry and Phillip were thoroughly engrossed in Phillip's favourite topic – Quidditch. Harry was explaining to him why a Seeker had to time the use of a Wronski Feint just right or else the opposition wouldn't bite and he'd find himself out of position for no gain.

Evelyn and George were smiling at each other across the table and trading little expressions of affection that alternately made Daphne

smile and frown. One time, she caught Harry's attention and he only shrugged in response.

Susan and Amelia were dining at Green Hills this evening. Lady Augusta had met Susan and Amelia at social functions, but they had not dined together. Daphne smiled remembering Susan and Neville's nervousness; each of them for different reasons.

"Thank the gods that we didn't have to go through that," she mumbled to herself before casting an eye at Astoria. Since they'd taken the fourth year from school on Saturday morning, Astoria had been quiet and reserved. While normally a shy girl in the company of others, at home she was quite gregarious and even opinionated.

Leaning to her right, she asked her sister, "Are you alright?"

Daphne was shocked to see her sister glare at her. "I'm fine," the younger girl hissed at her sister.

Frowning, Daphne pushed, "No really, what's bothering you?"

Astoria abruptly stood from the table and said to her sister, "Dinner was excellent as usual. My compliments to Dobby."

Thoroughly bewildered, Daphne called, "Stori?" as her sister quickly left the Dining Room.

Looking to Harry and seeing an equally bemused expression, she made to stand.

"Don't."

Now irritated, Daphne looked to her mother for an explanation. "Don't try and talk to her while she's upset. She'll calm down quickly and you can talk to her after dinner."

"What's she so upset about?"

Evelyn paused and looked at her plate. "I'm not sure."

Daphne waved her hand in exasperation before resuming her meal in an irritated silence.

The long moment of silence was awkward. Daphne ignored it as she resolutely attacked her dinner.

"So, when the opposing chasers are using the Hawkshead, it's a good time to pull a starfish and stick on them?" Phillip asked his brother in law, breaking the tension.

Harry looked at him mutely for a long moment before answering, "Well, it depends..."

.oOo.

"Dobby," Daphne called.

With a muted pop, the young elf who kept Rowan Hill in top shape appeared in front of her, beaming a smile.

"Yes, Mistress? How can Dobby serve?"

Daphne gave the half smile that Dobby's enthusiasm always seemed to engender. "Do you know where my sister currently is?"

"Mistress Astoria is in her bedroom, Mistress."

"Thank you, Dobby. Dinner was delicious, as usual."

Before he could respond, Daphne was moving away so she missed the tears of gratitude that welled up in his eyes at her complement.

Daphne paused outside Astoria's bedroom. It was in the east wing so the balcony had a gorgeous view of the mountains and their encircling forests. Daphne opened the door after a firm knock. The knock was just to announce her presence, not ask permission to enter.

She found her sister leaning on the balcony rail, looking out into the early evening sky. Daphne rolled her eyes when Astoria didn't acknowledge her presence. Walking to the French doors which opened on the balcony, she leaned on the jamb. After waiting what seemed like an eternity, but couldn't have been more than thirty seconds, Daphne asked, "Do you want to tell me about it?"

She thought she'd asked in a congenial tone. The look of fury on her sister's face seemed to bely that belief. "No!" Astoria hissed before walking all the way across the room and flouncing into an overstuffed chair.

Thoroughly annoyed and out of patience, Daphne barked, "What is your problem? You're acting like a brat!"

Bolting up from her chair, Astoria shouted at her sister, "My problem? My problem is you, sister dear!" Her sarcasm was not lost on Daphne.

Daphne glared at her sister and waved her hand for the younger girl to continue. "Screw you, Daphne! You don't own me. You're not my mother!"

Now Daphne's temper began to sizzle, "You know, you can just sit up here and sulk over what's bothering you. I tried to help, and you just want to be a child."

Daphne moved to the door to leave when Astoria unloaded on her. "You want to know my problem? It's you!" The livid girl was shaking in her emotion as Daphne turned with a shocked look on her face.

"What did I do?" she asked in real confusion.

"What did you do?" the younger girl scoffed. "My life is ruined because of you!"

Thoroughly confused, Daphne's temper surged back, "What!"

Pointing her finger at her sister, Astoria shouted, "You just had to go and marry him didn't you? My life has been bouncing from bad to worse ever since. Did you think of anyone beyond yourself? No!"

A wave of guilt swept over Daphne, she hadn't thought of the impact of her marriage on the family. Maybe if she had, her father would still be alive.

Astoria was on a roll and not to be denied, "My summer turns to crap. Father is killed. I end up in the hospital after seeing some truly horrific things. Little Phillip is now head of the Family. Mother has taken up with a Healer of all things. You pull me out of school. And you," the venom in her voice was unmistakable. "You go prancing about being all socialite Lady Potter," the sneer in her voice dripped with scorn. "Well, fuck you."

Enraged Daphne shot back. "Listen to me you ungrateful bitch," The Wolf was snarling through her and she could almost feel her hackles rise. "I've done the best I could for our family. The attack on the house would have happened regardless of my marriage; me being with Harry just moved up the timetable a bit. Anyway, it's not as if I had much of a choice in the matter. Father just as good as sold me."

"Oh, don't give me that shit! You were ecstatic to be his wife. You were probably shagging him before he came back with the contract. Probably why he did it in the first place. You must be a pretty good piece of ass for Lord Potter to jump at you."

Daphne saw red and before she knew what she was doing, she'd crossed the ten feet that separated her from her sister and slapped her across the face, hard.

"If it wasn't for our mother, I'd throw you out of my home. As it is, stay in your room. If you want to have a tantrum, you'll do it out of sight. I am Lady Potter and you will obey me in my own home." With that, she turned on her heel and strode out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

.oOo.

Daphne stood on the veranda, watching the moon. Her mood waxed and waned from furious to sad and back. She had ignored her family the last few months since her marriage to Harry. To be fair, she had been whipped along as if holding on to the tail of a tiger. Still, this was her family and in retrospect, she had to concede that Astoria's life had been very difficult since that late June day.

Didn't mean she had to be such a harpy, though.

The only aspect of Astoria's rant that Daphne felt she had a legitimate defence was that all her actions had been without malice. Inconsideration and a touch of self-centeredness, yes. Nevertheless, there was no malice in Daphne's heart.

Sighing, she debated climbing up to Astoria's room when she heard footsteps in the hall. Without turning, she stilled and listened until a soft voice called out.

"Daphne?"

Astoria had been crying, that was evident. Turning to her sister, Daphne saw the hesitant expression, the longing for reconciliation. Daphne held out her arms and the younger girl flew into her sister's arms.

"I'm so sorry. I was such a bitch."

Shaking her head and holding her sibling close, Daphne countered, "No, I've focused on myself and my husband to the exclusion of you, Mum and Phillip. I'm sorry I haven't been there for you, Stori."

Astoria shook her head again, but didn't say anything. After a while, the sisters sat on a bench together and watched the moon. Daphne cast a Warming charm on Astoria when the younger girl shivered. "Thanks."

"Sure. So want to tell me what started all this?"

Astoria shrugged in an embarrassed way.

"No, really, what's up?"

Astoria sighed, "Getting pulled out of school just drove home how abnormal my life had become. My sister is Lady Potter and my brother in law is the Boy-Who-Lived. I had started to see a boy and..."

She never finished as Daphne interrupted. "Who? What house?"

Astoria smiled and rolled her eyes. "His name is Patrick Coakley and he's a Ravenclaw."

From there, their discussion devolved into the official realm of 'girl talk'. When they headed upstairs a few hours later, they paused at the head of the stairs where Daphne embraced Astoria for a long moment.

"I love you Stori."

"I love you too, Daphne."



Astoria headed to the east wing while Daphne turned to the west. Closing the door to the master bedroom, she saw Harry sitting in a chair next to their oversized fireplace, reading a book and waiting up for her.

"Everything Ok?" he asked.

She sighed and motioned him to the bed. Bone tired and emotionally spent, she needed his physical closeness. He lay in his spot while she cuddled up to him. He was still toasty from the fire so she took advantage of it by curling about him. "It is now. She was feeling...pressure. Abnormal. Teenage angst. All kinds of stuff wrapped up into one."

Harry wrapped her up in his arms and asked, "But everything is sorted?"

She sighed in relief and tiredness. "Yeah. Could you stay in bed tonight? I need you here and not in the library."

Nodding to her, he then kissed the top of her head. "Sure."

16 November 1996 Thursday

Daphne looked about the sitting room and tapped her nails nervously. Tonks sat in the window seat talking to Remus who leaned on the wall next to her. Neville and Susan sat on the couch across from her silently holding hands and waiting. Hermione sat in the chair next to Daphne's, attempting to read a book. Daphne smiled at her bushy haired friend. The young woman had been looking at the same page for the last ten minutes.

Standing in front of the fire and warming his hands was Rodger Young. Their charms professor had actually approached Daphne about his concerns, so she had invited him to the gathering this

evening. Jean Dubois concurred as well, but had an unavoidable commitment.

The reason for their gathering walked in the door, a book in his hand. Harry had been reading as he walked so he didn't notice the abrupt cessation of discussion, but he did notice Daphne's soft, "Harry, we would like to talk with you."

Harry looked about the room quizzically. Most returned his look with a neutral expression, except Remus. The werewolf had a look of regret on his face, as if the discussion to come was somehow his fault.

With a slight frown, he sat in his chair next to the fire. "What's going on?" he asked.

Before Daphne could say anything, Remus spoke. "Harry, we're very concerned."

Settling in his chair, he set the book on the table next to him and responded, "What's going on?"

There was a long pause where Daphne decided to take the plunge. "We're all concerned about you, love."

"Me? What about me?" Now his face was closed, defensive.

Tonks picked up the thread, "You're pushing yourself too hard, Harry."

"You're not sleeping enough, not eating enough," Neville continued.

"You're running yourself into the ground," finished Susan.

Harry looked into his lap for a moment and Daphne thought to herself, Oh shit. Here it comes.

"I don't see anyone else here who is fated to face and kill Voldemort. I don't see anyone else here who has that responsibility hanging over him. What else am I supposed to do? Laze my way through the day as more people die?"

Abruptly, he stood from his chair and stalked toward the door. Rodger Young stood in his path and held out his hands.

"Peace, young Harry," the large man soothed. "We are here because we all care about you."

Harry glared at the man for a long moment before nodding his head and turning to the others. Daphne had a tear track on her cheek while Neville rubbed Susan's back.

"Harry, don't be a prat."

The Boy-Who-Lived looked at Tonks as if she had two heads.

The metamorph stood and waved her hands in agitation, "You are not responsible for what Voldemort does! You aren't responsible for the people he hurts or kills! Just because you are 'fated' to meet with him, doesn't mean you should run yourself into the dirt first."

Harry's glare was back, "You have no idea. Every night I think about the thirteen people that he continually murdered and then sent their mutilated corpses to the Ministry atrium. Even when it stopped last week, I still remember. He did that for months! How many died? If I had been a better student, if I had put forth more effort before, I might be ready now. How many lives would be saved? How is that not my fault?"

"That is so much crap, I'm stunned to hear that from you," commented Hermione.

She'd been quiet up until now, but Harry recognized her expression. The brightest witch of her age was hopping mad and Harry was about to get an earful.

"Every year you've had a life threatening situation hanging over your head. Every year you've had to fight your way through the Headmaster's manipulations and games just to survive the term. Let's not forget the minor hurdles like a Dark Lord, Dementors, Dragons, Basilisks and so on that you had to dispatch. Minor things like projects, essays and homework have taken a justified back seat to your survival."

A small smile flitted on the edge of Harry's mouth. A joke about the importance of homework was forming, but fell flat in the atmosphere of the room.

"You've done more to fight Voldemort in the last five years than anyone else on the planet." Hermione stood and was shaking her finger at her best friend. "You beat him at the Stone. You beat his memory in the Chamber. You beat him in the Graveyard. You beat him at the Ministry. You beat him in the Alley. At every turn, you stop him, so stop feeling so guilty. It's not your fault, and it's not your responsibility!"

At the last, she wrapped her arms around Harry and gave him one of her trademark hugs.

Gently, he returned her hug. The group gave a collective sigh of relief, thinking they'd won him over. Daphne, however, tensed. She knew he'd not been 'won over' nor were they past the explosive part of the conversation.

Harry usually didn't say much. They'd chat and talk about their day, but when it came to his emotions; his expression was a far better indicator of how he felt than his words. Once she'd figured that out, Daphne began to read him quite accurately. The soft, open,

wondrous expression of his love melted her heart every time. She could almost feel his love washing over her when he looked at her with that expression.

After Molly Weasley's howler was the first time she'd seen him truly angry. Thunderous brows atop flashing eyes and a twisted mouth very clearly told her to stand back.

Now, he had a fairly neutral expression which made Daphne nervous. He had his walls up and, for the moment, didn't trust the people he was surrounded by. This hurt her a little bit. Ever since they'd been united in late June, he'd been open with her. At first, it was because of his injuries. He couldn't help but be open with her. Very quickly, though, they'd fallen in love and he wanted to be open with her.

Harry gently let go of the sister of his heart and proceeded to glare at everyone in the room. After a long moment, he asked, "Since you all insist that I take it easy, answer me this, if you will."

"I know how to vanquish Voldemort. That's actually the easy part. I need to be good enough to hold him down for about thirty to forty five seconds while I perform the ritual. So tell me how I'm to be good enough to incapacitate the most powerful Dark Lord since Morgana LeFey without working my ass off to get there!"

He finished in a muted roar as the stunned crowd of his loved ones watched him.

In a subdued tone, Daphne tried to sooth her husband. "Love, we aren't saying that you should take it easy and relax on the beach all day. Just back off the high intensity tempo you've been working at the last month or so. Eight or even ten hours a day of studying should be good enough without you burning up like a firework."

He glared at her for the first time in their acquaintance. His mouth opened to say something, but the words failed him and his lip curled

in a sneer. He reserved the expression for people he loathed. Snape, Umbridge and Voldemort had been on the receiving end of that glare.

Knowing this, Daphne tucked her head and cried. Her heart felt that all her fears were coming true; he felt betrayed by her and now hated her. Tonks came to Daphne's left side, while Susan came to her right. Both women glared at Harry while they held their friend.

Neville walked up to Harry and punched him on the jaw.

Harry recoiled in shock as Neville glared at his best friend. "You bloody pillock! She loves you more than her own life! We're all here because we love you! We're on your side, goddamn you!"

With wide eyes, Harry rubbed his already bruising jaw. A guilty expression emerged on his face like the clouds revealing the sun. Daphne met his eyes and before she averted her face, she saw remorse on his face like she'd never seen. His voice was soft when he asked them all, "Could you please give Daphne and me some privacy?"

Susan stayed by Daphne's side, Neville waiting for his girlfriend by the door. Everyone else had left when Susan stood, walked up to Harry and hissed at him. "If you hurt her again, I'll transform and claw out your eyes."

Harry flinched and looked at his feet, nodding as he did so. Susan strode out of the room, not looking back. Harry met Neville's gaze and the Longbottom of Longbottom gave him a nod. Daphne could tell that the young man was trying to remind his friend that Harry had stood by him in a hard time and Neville would stand by his friend in a hard time.

With tears in his eyes, Harry whispered, "Thanks, Nev."

"Anytime, brother."

Harry nodded and Neville shut the door to the sitting room as he left.

"I'm sorry."

Harry rocked back on his heels as his wife apologized to her. He quickly moved so that he was kneeling in front of her. Daphne's face was tear-stained and her eyes were red. She sat there wringing a handkerchief in her hands as she pleaded with him, "Please forgive me. I didn't want to betray you." Frantic, she was trying to reverse the course of events so that he would absolve her of the perceived wrongdoing. "Don't leave me."

Later, he told her that his heart broke and he filled with self loathing when she said this. The only thing he could think to do was take her in his arms and hold her close.

Daphne broke down. Sobbing, she barely heard him repeatedly apologize. "I'm so sorry, Daph. It's not your fault. It's all my fault, I'm so sorry." Finally, her sobs trickled to sniffles and he muttered, "It's been so crazy and I'm..."

She gained a measure of control over herself and looked up at him. "What?" she asked.

It was his turn for the tears to brim over his eyes. She reached up and cupped his face with both hands. It was a reassuring touch, conveying love and trust. "Tell me."

"I'm terrified that I'll lose you. I can't live without you. I don't want to live without you."

Through a wet smile, she wiped his tears, "Silly man. We'll never be apart. Not even death can truly part us."

He crushed her to him and they held each other tight. After a bit, they

relaxed their embrace and settled into a comforting cuddle on the couch.

"Next time, talk to me when you're feeling this kind of thing." She poked him in the chest playfully, "Partners, remember?"

Nodding, he answered, "I will, love." He paused then continued, "And you need to tell me about your fears. I'll never leave you. Only death will separate us and even then, I'll be waiting for you."

She nodded into his chest as he squeezed her tight. "I need to apologize to the group, don't I?"

"It'd be a good idea. We all gathered because we were concerned and love you. I'm sure they understand, but an apology wouldn't be amiss."

He began to play with her hair and she arched her back, almost purring under his ministrations.

"I love you Daphne."

"I love you, too."

.oOo.

"So what's with 'I know how to vanquish Voldemort. That's actually the easy part' stuff, Harry?" Susan was sitting on Neville's lap after Harry had made his mass apology for his earlier tantrum.

Harry shrugged as Daphne rubbed his hand. "I found it in the Black Family grimoire. It's called 'Judging of the Damned' and it's a pretty powerful ritual. In a nutshell, I invoke the forces of magic to judge the person I cast the spell on and offer myself as a comparison. If the other person, Voldemort in this case, is condemned he's cast into hell."



Daphne frowned, "There must be a catch, it's too easy."

Rubbing his free hand through his inky locks, Harry explained, "I have to also offer myself as the compensation in case he's not found wanting."

Now there were lots of frowns. Remus spoke first, "Harry, could you please transcribe everything regarding this ritual for me. I'd like to do a little more investigating before you offer yourself as a willing sacrifice in a ritual about which we don't know a lot of details."

Daphne tightened her grip on her husband's hand. On the surface, the ritual appeared to be an easy solution. With Voldemort's history of violence, there was very little chance that he wouldn't be condemned and cast into perdition.

However, this was magic and anything was possible.

She heard a muted crack of apparition from the Entry Hall. Harry glanced at his watch and muttered, "Hope it's Amelia."

When the sitting Minister for Magic of the United Kingdom strode by the doorway, Harry muttered, "Be right back," and hurried after Amelia.

A few minutes later, Harry returned to the sitting room and sidled up to his wife. Daphne cuddled up to him again and as they all watched Remus and Tonks fight over the WWN station to listen to, she murmured her question to him.

"So, what was that all about?"

He leaned into her ear and answered in an equally low voice. "I asked Amelia for help. I want the best fighter to train me. All of us will participate, I suppose. But I need to be better."

She nodded her understanding as the Weird Sisters blared over the wireless, indicating that Remus had lost the argument with Tonks.

.oOo.

22 November 1996 Wednesday

"Harry, I found your new trainer."

Harry had been a bit nervous about his request. Amelia had been perfectly amenable about his need to be better, but it had almost been a week since he asked.

Nodding, he asked, "Who is he and when will he be available?"

Cocking an eyebrow in amusement, the Minister teased the young man of whom she was so fond. "A bit anxious are we?"

Harry rolled his eyes in response and sighed, "Amelia..."

Daphne smiled from the other end of the breakfast table. Despite her age, Amelia had become a big sister to Harry. Notwithstanding his grumblings, she knew that he truly had come to love the older woman. On occasion, he would go to her for advice about government, business and most recently, life matters.

After a sip of her tea and munch of her scone, Amelia sighed in return. "Since you're so impatient, I guess I'll tell you." She smiled when Susan snickered and elaborated.

"He's not in the DMLE, per se. He's in a ...different ...department of the Ministry."

"An Unspeakable, then," Daphne offered.

With an exaggerated motion, Amelia shrugged. Returning to her breakfast, she said, "His name is Roland and he'll be here at one."

.oOo.

The fireplace in the Entry Hall roared as the clock struck one. The Floo fired green and disgorged a tall lean man. Harry and Daphne were waiting for him and took an involuntary step back when the man straightened up.

Few people in the world inspire feelings in others around them when first met. Harry had been that way for her. Daphne smiled ruefully to herself, That could be different, though. Despite her loathing of the man, Albus Dumbledore inspired a feeling of awe and respect. She supposed that had Tom Riddle not become Lord Voldemort, he too would have that effect on others. However, as Lord Voldemort he inspired fear, terror even.

This Roland, though, his entire persona radiated danger.

Daphne's thoughts were more of an impression. Later, she'd tell Susan that she could almost feel the intensity of the man. He was a warrior, a knight from another age. She instantly knew that the man was implacable in his pursuit, devastatingly proficient in combat and terrifyingly single minded.

He was exactly who they needed.

His pale blue eyes surveyed them both dispassionately and sternly at the same time, if that was possible. Silently he looked at them, his piercing gaze peering out from a face that was all sharp angles. After a long evaluation, he spoke.

"Where shall we begin?"

.oOo.

"What is your objective?"

"To defeat Voldemort," Harry responded. They were in the Library, having a discussion regarding their path ahead. Roland sat across the table from the Potters and was all business.

Frowning, he asked, "What does it mean to 'defeat' your enemy? I don't know what that means in practical terms."

A bit befuddled, Harry answered, "To capture or kill him."

"Which is it?"

"Kill."

"Good. I ask you again, what is your objective?"

"To kill Voldemort."

Leaning back in his chair, this lean, dangerous man evaluated Daphne's husband again. "Can you kill?"

"Yes."

"Have you killed?"

"Yes."

Nodding to himself as if taking a mental note, Roland reached in his robes and withdrew a short stemmed, wide bowl pipe. Without looking at it, he filled, tamped and lit it. The entire time he watched Harry.

Daphne was more than a bit nervous. Roland was an extremely intimidating man. He wasn't that large, but his personality screamed

'predator'. If he were an Animagus, he would be an apex predator. Realizing this, she calmed. She too was an apex predator.

After a few draws on his pipe, Roland asked another of his seemingly interminable questions.

"How do you kill?"

Somewhat bemused, Harry glanced at Daphne. She frowned and shook her head; she didn't understand the question either.

"How do you kill, young Potter?"

Still puzzled, Harry answered, "With my wand or other weapon."

Scowling, Roland stared at Harry. After another long silence, the Unspeakable spoke in a cold, flat tone. "Wrong."

Harry was becoming a bit irritated. With more than a little sarcasm, he asked, "Well, since I've been killing these Death Eaters all wrong so far, why don't you tell me how to do it correctly?"

She wasn't sure, but Daphne thought a ghost of a smile flitted across the older man's face. It was gone before she could be sure.

"How do you cast a spell?"

"Intent and execution." Now Harry and Daphne were completely confused.

Roland nodded and continued the digression. "So when you cast, say, a Cutting curse at a Death Eater and kill him, you have a mechanical aspect of the casting that is mated to a mental attitude."

The light began to shine on his point for Daphne and she didn't like it. Narrowing her eyes at the man, she waited for him to come full circle.

"The mechanical aspects of the spell are beside the point. They are ingrained into your muscle memory and you are at the point now where you make wand movements without realizing you are doing it, yes?"

Harry nodded in response. He had a contemplative expression on his face as he pondered Roland's logic.

"Therefore, the mental aspect of the spell is what is important. Your intent. As a result, I ask you again, young Potter. How do you kill?"

"With my mind."

"Very true. Where does the intent for your spell originate?"

With a falling expression, Harry answered in a low voice, "My heart."

Roland nodded in satisfaction. "That is why you have not killed him yet. I have watched multiple memories of your encounter with him in Diagon Alley. You were not ready in your mind. Your spellcasting is good. Your mechanics are sufficient for the task."

"Your mind and heart are not ready for the task."

"The term 'No Quarter' was invented for situations like this. Hesitation is death. You were very lucky. You hesitated; in return, he counterattacked and by a miracle of heaven, you survived. That will not happen again. You must attack, attack, attack. Gain the advantage, press the advantage and then cut off his fucking head."

This was all delivered in a flat tone as if he were discussing the differences between Quodpot and Quidditch.

"Since you do not kill with your wand, you kill with your heart; you must accept that you will deliberately kill this man. Can you do this?"

After a moment's reflection, Harry nodded.

Sitting back in his chair, Roland nodded again. Drawing deeply on his pipe, he contemplated Harry for a short moment. "Good. We can get to work then."

.oOo.

28 November 1996 Tuesday

Roland had almost killed Harry twice. The man was faster than a snake and preternaturally accurate with his spellcasting. They started a 'familiarization duel' in the Room of Pain as it was sleeting outside.

Roland immediately called a halt.

"Why are you still visible?"

Harry looked at him with an open mouth before sheepishly replying, "Because I never thought of Disillusioning myself?"

With the patient tones of a teacher, Roland explained, "This is for no quarter, young Potter. There is no 'fair' in your fight with Voldemort. Use any and all dirty tricks you can think of against him. Be sure that he will use them against you."

Nodding, Harry began the wand movement for the Disillusionment charm when Roland stopped him again. "Not Disillusionment, but Invisibility. Disillusionment can still be seen and to an experienced duellist, it's no real hindrance." Roland promptly taught Harry the spell for true Invisibility. "It will last for a few hours before it wears off. Disillusionment lasts longer, though.

Roland then ripped off four Bludgeoning hexes that knocked Harry

unconscious, breaking his shoulder in the process. Daphne, who was sitting off to the side watching, stared open mouthed at the man's speed.

Casually, Roland healed the Potter heir then awakened him. "Faster. You must be faster."

So it went. At one point in the beating, Roland paused to allow Harry a moment to catch his breath and drink a glass of water. He explained, "I am not nearly as powerful as you or Voldemort in raw magical power. In a contest of that sort, I would be left behind by you. However, I am faster. As such, I can negate your power by incapacitating you before you can bring your power to bear."

A curtain was pulled away in Daphne's mind and the light shown on the solution. She was excited now that she could see the solution. Desire to run up to Roland and hug him followed by snogging her husband within an inch of his life coursed through her as she fought just to stay in her seat.

Harry, too, must have come to the same conclusion. A look of happy amazement stole over his features. "I can beat him if I can bring my high power to bear on him faster than he can bring it on me."

"Yes."

"But he's pretty fast already."

"True, but you can be faster."

"But I've been beating Death Eaters. Well trained Death Eaters."

"There is a gulf of difference between the Dark Lord Voldemort and Lucius Malfoy."

Harry nodded solemnly in agreement before smiling again.



"You must believe that you can be faster than anyone alive, myself included. You must know this as a fact and when your heart and mind are united in this belief, your body will catch up. Belief begins with a decision. Faith is built upon successful execution of said belief." Roland's eyes bored into Harry's. Pale blue chips of ice bored into the lush emerald green. "Now, decide."

Now that the lesson had been imparted, the duelling stopped and speed exercises began, followed by accuracy drills.

Every afternoon, Roland came over and trained Harry while Daphne watched. She took to performing the exercises and drills on her own time. Usually while Harry napped in recovery from the punishment he took from the tall, lean man.

Sunday was a day of rest and the humourless man nodded at Daphne's sugary sweet thanks for a day off. Harry slept until noon and then Daphne dragged him through their private Floo to the house in France where they lay on the fairly warm beach for the day.

.oOo.

As Daphne worked her way through her breakfast plate, she stretched her right leg. She'd had a muscle pull at the top of her right calf for over a week and the pain seemed to migrate from her knee to her calf and back. Stretching had mitigated the pain somewhat, but she was already very limber.

Rest was the only thing that truly helped and she chafed at not being able to run. Ruefully, she smiled to herself. When they started running over the summer, she'd hated it. Now, she missed it intensely. Running became a contest of her will over her body's tiredness and weakness. Daphne Potter was definitely competitive.

Harry didn't seem to mind the results either.

She looked down at the other end of the table, watching Harry and Susan chatting about something. In bed last night, he'd rolled over to her and she'd expected him to want to have sex. Instead, he wanted to talk.

In the light of the moon that was just past full, he had closed his eyes and opened himself to her. He was worried. Roland's instruction was twofold. Magically, he was driving Harry to be faster, more accurate with each spell. "Make each spell count," was the maxim. Harry had no problem with that, in fact he embraced the concept.

What was most worrisome was the other half of the instruction. Roland's concept of 'I kill with my mind' had really shaken Harry to the core. He was afraid he would lose himself; lose or damage that which makes him the Harry that she loved and he liked to be.

He had spoken haltingly. As she curled up to his side, she realized that it was very difficult for him to talk about his own fears or insecurities. Part must have been the natural reticence that most people have regarding baring their most painful fears. However, another aspect of his reticence tied directly to those bastards who go by the name of Dursley.

Her eyes narrowed in malice as she thought of them. Retribution would be forthcoming.

Later, she'd made slow sweet love to him, eyes open and gazing into his own. Her cerulean mingled with his emerald, lovingly, affectionately. She was surprisingly moved and as they lay in the afterglow of their love Daphne almost wept, the emotions were so consuming.

In the end, they had talked through the situation and Harry had come to the conclusion that he really didn't have much of a choice. He

didn't want to become a cold and hard person, but in battle, he'd put the persona on like a cloak. A tool to help him just as much as their newly purchased dragons hide body armour.

As Daphne faded to sleep wrapped in his arms, she heard him whisper, "At least I hope it won't be permanent."

She hoped so as well. For both of their sakes.

.oOo.

Amelia came in and sat at the table. Paging through the paper and sipping her tea, Amelia munched toast and slowly became human. Daphne had only once attempted to talk to the older woman before being spoken to first. It had been an unhappy experience.

Eventually, the elder Bones at the table stood, moved to the sideboard to plate her meal and returned looking a tad more human. "Harry," she drawled, "we're starting to pull in larger numbers of Death Eaters. Your memory of the graveyard resurrection was like pulling a thread and the whole seam is beginning to come undone."

Daphne now had her full attention on their eldest housemate. "We're picking up quite a few foreigners in the mix. It seems that Voldemort has been recruiting heavily in the former eastern block countries. Poverty is poverty, be you a wizard or muggle. He's paying and they are willing."

"Mercenaries? He's marking mercenaries?" Susan asked, incredulous.

With a gimlet eye, Amelia turned to her niece and responded, "What better way to ensure their loyalty?" To this, Susan could only shrug in acceptance of the point. Amelia looked down at her plate, her expression one of mingled frustration and exasperation.

"It feels like he has a bottomless pit of manpower." Waving her free hand at her own dramatics, she winced and countered her own statement, "Oh, I know he doesn't. That's not possible; it just feels that way." Pointing to Harry, she continued, "You and your team have taken down approximately fifty Death Eaters. Well over one hundred perished in the Diagon Alley skirmish. We've rolled up a further thirty. A Chimera, a score of trolls. He may not be out of people, but he must be feeling the pinch. It must be driving him mad."

A new idea occurred to Daphne. Like the rising sun, it quickly filled out full form in her mind and she began to smile. From the other end of the table, Harry cocked an eyebrow at her in query.

"I have a little idea," she announced.

.oOo.

07 December 1996 Sunday

Daphne woke to a voice calling, "Harry, wake up." Lifting her head from her pillow, she saw Remus standing at the foot of the bed calling out in a futile attempt to wake her husband.

Squinting against the light of his illuminated wand, she asked, "What is it, Remus?"

She could feel his sigh down the length of the king sized bed and the werewolf's expression conveyed an exhausted, unutterable sadness.

"Voldemort attacked Hogwarts last night. Minerva is dead."

Fully awake, she flopped down on the bed, her stomach a twisted cold mass.

"I'll wake him, we'll be down shortly."

Daphne rolled onto her back, staring at the gilt ceiling. Her grief mingled with shock and the combination threatened to overwhelm her.

Taking a moment to watch her peacefully sleeping husband, Daphne soaked in the image of him. Laying on his stomach, arms tucked under his pillow, he was facing her in the first slivers of early morning light. He looked so peaceful, so at ease with the world, she hated the thought of rousing him to more death and destruction.

Unbidden, a wave of hatred washed over her. Damn you to hell, Voldemort. May God damn you to the deepest reaches of the deepest pits in Tartarus. I hope the fate of Chronos is mild compared to what they do to you.

Glancing at the bedside clock, she saw it was five AM. Only a half hour earlier than their normal rousing time. With a sigh of sorrow, frustration and sadness, Daphne scooted across the bed to waken her husband.

.oOo.

A hollow eyed Harry Potter sat at his breakfast table. The normal sumptuous feast had been carefully prepared by Dobby. It had been artfully displayed and the room sparkled like a freshly cut diamond.

Harry didn't notice.

Troubled by Harry's reaction to the news of Minerva's death, Daphne sat at the opposite end of the table watching him and worrying her napkin. Back and forth, she twisted the linen square. She was awash in emotion; grief for their professor whom she had come to regard with affection, worry for her husband, relief that they'd removed Astoria from school in time, anger at Dumbledore for allowing the attack to happen.

She realized that blaming Dumbledore for the attack was irrational and childish. It didn't make the feeling go away, though. Amelia had wolfed down her breakfast, but before she left for what promised to be a very long day, she'd informed them that there were no other deaths. Unfortunately, most of the staff was wounded to varying degrees.

Attempting to comfort Harry after Amelia left, she was gently rebuffed. He turned to her with an expression as bleak as an early January sky; the only words he would speak were, "The last thing I said to her was unkind."

Words failed her so she attempted to convey the depth of her support with her body. She led him to the sofa and wrapped her arms around him, pulling him close. He resisted at first. She could feel his muscles stiffen and stand out like steel cords.

No miraculous solution for Harry and his emotional state occurred to her. She did for him that her mother had done for her. Slowly, she rubbed his back in a gentle circular pattern. Her hand traced a path between his shoulder blades that slowly but surely encouraged him to relax.

Twenty minutes later, he had completely melded into her embrace, wrapping his own arms around her. Clinging to her like a lifebuoy, he began to breathe with a hitching gait. Five minutes after this, his first tear fell. A liquid drop of grief, carrying away heartache, grief, anger. With his first sob, Daphne returned her attention to her own feelings and succumbed to the grief welling up inside her.

She never did find out how long they lay there, holding each other in their sadness while the storm of grief raged in their hearts. Eventually, they swapped positions and Harry held his wife close. With her head on his chest, Daphne listened to his heartbeat and felt safe. Harry whispered, "Thank you. I love you."

"Anytime, Harry. I love you."

.oOo.

Daphne and Harry slowly walked the path from Hogsmeade to their former school. When Harry had suggested they visit the school and see how Filius fared, she had nodded and said, "Maybe we should ask the other members of the Fifteen if they want to visit the injured as well? A show of solidarity against the Death Eaters."

Dobby had popped away with five letters. Susan and Neville were eating breakfast and agreed to come to the school. Daphne had given Neville a big hug when he had broken down at the news of Minerva's death.

It appeared that the two orphan boys had held their former head of house much closer to their heart than most others had. She could see how Minerva could fill a long needed role for both young men. This must have been especially true when they came to know her on a more personal level this past summer.

The sky was overcast and the wind gusted, chilling them through their heavy cloaks. Daphne leaned into Harry and he put his arm around her shoulder. Ahead of them on the path, Susan and Neville unconsciously mimicked the Potters.

They were all dressed in black, deference to their fallen professor and the remaining wounded was foremost in all their minds. Daphne sombrely reflected on death. Before this past summer, she'd experienced death twice. The family's dog had died when she was ten and her Grandmama had passed when she was fourteen.

Grandmama had been a wonderful woman, but old. Many a time the frail, aged woman would grin at her eldest granddaughter and whisper, "I'm not going to be around much longer, my dear. Must tell you how wonderful you are and that I love you." This was always

followed by a warm hug that lasted just the right amount of time. When the old woman passed on, Daphne had cried long. Not because she was shocked over the old woman's death. Rather, it was because she was already missing the wonderful woman who told the best stories.

Leaning into Harry, she wiped a tear off her cheek. Her regard for Minerva was complicated. For many years, she'd considered the Transfiguration teacher as one of her professors, nothing more.

This summer she'd come to know the woman quite well and respected her highly. In the repressive, bigoted society that made up magical Britain, Minerva McGonagall was one of the few women each generation who climbed to a post of leadership and excelled. She, and Professor Sprout to a lesser extent, was a shining example to the young witches that they didn't have to be housewives if they didn't desire it. Professional careers were open to them as women. There would be work – and glass ceilings that they'd have to deal with - but it was attainable.

Amelia was like that as well. She too had overcome many obstacles to rise to the height of her profession. Not a small feat, by any means. Since the Bones family had semi-permanently moved into Rowan Hill, Daphne's esteem for the Minister had grown exponentially. Her love and affection for the older woman had grown, as well.

Upon reflection, Minerva and her Grandmama had been very similar. Grandmama had always encouraged Daphne to be her own person. With love and affection (and quite a few butter biscuits), she'd pushed Daphne to strive to be better and never let anyone run you down. Minerva had encouraged, browbeat and horsewhipped Daphne to push herself beyond her current abilities. Both women had believed in her. Both were gone.

Looking up at Harry, she realized that he too pushed her. In his own way, that is. He loved her and fully believed that she was the best



woman he'd ever known. He'd told her this on numerous occasions but it never seemed to sink in to her collective belief system. It surprised her every time.

She believed him when he told her that he found her beautiful. She believed him when he told her that he found her sexy. She believed him when he told her that he found her intelligent. But a moral, good person whom he admired? That was difficult for her. Maybe because she found him to be the best man she'd ever known.

In the end, she strove to be better because she didn't want to know what expression he wore if she let him down.

Why am I thinking about all this? Shaking her head, she tried to focus on the matter at hand. With more than a bit of foreboding, she walked into the Entry Hall as Harry held the door for all of them.

.oOo.

It was surreal and if the situation weren't so serious, Daphne would have laughed aloud. In the Hogwarts infirmary, all the beds were taken up by professors, with a few students and ex-students visiting them.

Biting back the nervous giggle that threatened to escape, she moved in the room and took a quick inventory of the occupants.

Dumbledore: asleep at the end of the aisle.

Flitwick: awake and sitting up in his bed, a book in his lap.

Sprout: awake and talking with three seventh years, her arm in a cast and a wicked scar already healing across her forehead.

Vector: asleep with a bandage about her head.

Babbling: asleep and missing her right arm.

And so it went.

She heard a deep sigh and turned to see Neville shaking his head. With an inquiring expression from Susan, he elaborated, "They're teachers. They shouldn't be fighting to defend the school. Yeah, it's a castle, but it's foremost a school." He shook his head in disgust as they made their way to Flitwick's side.

Their old charms master looked up at their approach and his face broke into a weary smile. Holding up his hands, he welcomed them, "Ah, it's good to see you all."

Daphne sniffled and nodded, sitting in a chair Harry conjured for her. All four sat and Harry asked, "What happened, Filius?"

The cheery man's face dropped and he frowned as he collected his thoughts. After a moment's consideration, he told the short tale.

"It was well after curfew and I was heading down to the kitchens for a spot of tea. I couldn't sleep and the brisk walk on top of the tea usually does the trick for me. I bumped into Albus who admitted to the same destination."

Rubbing his face he continued, "On the way back, there was a large 'boom' and the castle reverberated with the sound. Albus and I raced to the front doors, meeting Minerva and Pomona en route. He sealed all the dormitories and then summoned the rest of the staff to the Entry Hall."

"Just as we entered the Hall, the doors burst open and there was Voldemort and ten or so of his cronies. Albus immediately attacked the Dark Lord." Flitwick shook his head at the memory, "He was amazing."

Daphne's eyebrows shot up at that. From a man with Flitwick's ability in combat, the statement was high praise indeed.

Shaking his head, Flitwick continued in an emotion filled voice, "I was fighting two men, one of whom was Augustus Rookwood, while Minerva fought Lucius Malfoy. I had put down one when Minerva defeated Malfoy. We found out later that she transfigured his heart to stone. As she turned, Antonin Dolohov killed her with the Entrail Expelling curse."

Flitwick began to weep openly so Susan and Daphne moved to his side, comforting him the best they could. Over Flitwick's shoulder, Daphne saw Neville holding his head in his hands while Harry sat there, expressionless.

After a long minute or so, Flitwick regained his composure. Patting their arms, he thanked them, "Thank you girls. At that point, the Dark Lord began to cackle that mad laughter of his and stepped back from his duel with the Headmaster. Both of them were singed and smoking when Voldemort raised his hand and pointed to the professors that had been injured...or killed. He just pointed and laughed before he and his scum disappeared."

Flitwick sniffled and pulled out a handkerchief. The nervous giggle that had ebbed away from Daphne returned in full force. The handkerchief was normal size but on Flitwick's diminutive form, it was quite comic.

Biting her tongue, she patted the Charms Professor's leg and then said, "I know you and Minerva were great friends."

He nodded at her observation, "She was my best friend for over thirty years. I shall miss her greatly."

After a few more minutes of discussion, they four friends moved on when Flitwick began to yawn. Neville and Susan made a beeline for

Sprout while Daphne and Harry were intercepted by the newly arrived Amelia Bones, Connie Hammer, as well as, Reginald and Victoria Abbott.

Harry related what Flitwick had told them and Amelia nodded, "That correlates to what the Aurors told me." She thought for a long moment before continuing, "We may have lost Minerva, but you do realize this was a victory."

With a sour face, Daphne nodded. Voldemort had been beaten, again. Four more Death Eaters were dead – including their primary source of funds, Lucius Malfoy. "The price was high."

"No higher than in Diagon Alley," observed Reginald.

Nodding her head in reluctant acceptance, Daphne agreed, "True."

"Amelia, he only had ten Death Eaters with him," Harry observed.

With a grim smile, the Minister nodded, "I know."

.oOo.

By the light of the moon, the Wolf loped through the trees. She stopped on the edge of a clearing, senses alert. The sounds of the forest were quiet, but the wind whipped through the bare trees, making a natural chorus of sounds.

Glancing around, The Wolf saw nothing out of the ordinary and continued her run. Bounding through the naked brush, she kept climbing. Snowden is quite tall; the highest point in the kingdom, but with her long strides, The Wolf ate up the distance.

Two hours later, she stood at the top of the mountain, her chest heaving in the aftermath of her exertion.

She had cried in the afternoon. Cried for the orphans and spouses left behind. Cried for her friends who were lost to the fight. Even cried for the stupid bastards that fought for Voldemort, their souls were lost to the pit and they didn't even know it.

She had cried for herself. She had lost her father, but was terrified of losing someone truly close to her. Her mother, Stori, Phillip, Susan, Neville or - her fur rippled at the thought – Harry.

Strangely, the idea of her dying didn't bother her too much. When the reaper came, it came. There was nothing she could do but prepare and train.

She let a long howl curl up and then down the mountainside. The denizens of the forest stopped their tasks for the evening, looking up to the mount. The mood of the forest became tense with emotion, she'd shed her feelings and was free of the depression. Feeling much better after her run, Daphne shifted back to her human form and apparated to Rowan Hill.

Shivering a bit, she walked into the master suite to find Harry sitting by the fire, reading. He'd stuck to the agreement they'd made and only studied eight hours a day. After a week or two, he'd privately thanked her for forcing him to slow down. "I was burning out, but too desperate to slow down."

She went to him and he put his book down on the small side table. As she knelt in front of him, her hands on his thighs, his expression shifted from warm welcome to quizzical amusement.

Before he could say anything, she stopped him with her words. With an air of gravity, she looked him in the eye and said, "I love you with all that I am. I want you to know that, in case one of us is killed in the fight to come. I willingly go into the fight with you and willingly place my life in danger. I do it because I love you, but most of all I do it because it's the right thing to do."

His expression softened as she spoke and at the end, his eyes filled with tears. Softly, she finished, "It's my choice." Filled with emotion, he nodded.

"I love you."

"And I love you. Take me to bed husband, let's celebrate our lives."

A/N

1. I own nothing.

2. Thanks to all reviewers, I appreciate any and all comments and thank you for taking the time to let me know your thoughts. I expect to have quite 'hot' comments after this chapter's posted.

3. A mostly emotional chapter, the only firefight took place off camera, as it were. I wanted to catch up the characters with the plot. The last few chapters were rolling along like a freight train and our heroes didn't have much time to adjust. That was this chapter was to do.

4. Recommendation for the chapter is Harry Potter and the Wastelands of Time. A phenomenally written fic that has a very interesting twist on Harry going back in time to fix it all. I'm not one for fics with multiple pairings, but so far it hasn't gone down that road. Wonderful story, check it out.

## Chapter 15

08 December 1996 Monday

### POTTER CALLS You-Know-Who A COWARD

With a wry grin, Daphne read aloud from the morning paper, "Lord Potter, in an interview with his wife at his side, called the Wizarding terrorist, commonly referred to as 'You-Know-Who', a coward. 'The man hides behind his minions and tries to rule by fear. On top of his cowardice, he's not even a pureblood, despite his rabid ravings. He's a bastard; the union of a muggle father and a love potion wielding delusional witch'."

Susan began to giggle uncontrollably. Finally, she squeaked out, "Oh Harry, you've really stirred it up this time."

Harry leaned back in his chair, sipped his morning tea and adopted an innocent expression. "Me? What have I done? It's amazing the things you can find out with enough money, isn't it?"

The table as a whole chuckled until, in a timid voice, Evelyn asked, "Harry, do you think it was wise to do that, though?"

Daphne frowned at her mother and moved to reprove her, but Harry looked her away. She subsided as Harry answered his mother in law. "I'm very satisfied it was the correct course of action, mum." The use of 'mum' brought a happy smile to Evelyn's face while he continued, "I discussed this before hand with Daphne, Amelia, Susan and Neville. We also sought out Connie Hammer's counsel. Together, we all decided on this course of action."

Evelyn nodded in acceptance, her appearance more accepting, knowing that Harry had consulted with others before acting.

However, Harry wasn't done. With an impish smile at his wife, he

took a sip of his tea and then said, "After all, it was Daphne's idea in the first place."

Evelyn whipped her head at her daughter and her eyes narrowed. Daphne glared at her now laughing husband. Under her breath she muttered, "Don't cross a Slytherin, love."

Harry must have heard her as his laughing stopped abruptly. With a somewhat fearful expression, he toasted her with his steaming mug of tea.

She smiled sweetly at him, toasted him and return and considered the variety of methods she could use to instruct him. Gently instruct him that is, about teasing, versus teasing with one's mother as the target. Maybe a handful of backrubs. Maybe.

.oOo.

09 December 1996 Tuesday

"I didn't know she was a believer."

"Neither did I," Harry responded.

They were in the graveyard of St. Anthony's Roman Catholic Church, forty miles outside Inverness. Mass had been said over Minerva McGonagall's remains and now the priest was performing the graveyard service.

Daphne hadn't been raised in any formalized religion. Most purebloods came to believe in magic itself as a type of deity and disdained what they called 'muggle superstition'. Apparently, Minerva had been muggleborn or her family had maintained their faith from long ago.

The service with its ritual was very soothing for Daphne. The priest's



words were comforting in it's reminder of a life everlasting. Dumbledore, Filius and Minerva's sister, Venus, gave eulogies. Dumbledore's was surprisingly touching. He spoke of Minerva's dedication and love of children. One of the anecdotes he told, which surprised all there, was about Minerva crying when she had to fail a student for the first time. "She loved each and every one of her students, and they loved her." Faces that had been dry up to that point were surreptitiously averted and handkerchiefs withdrawn from pockets.

Filius had the congregation rollicking with laughter as he related the time the two of them got completely pickled in the aftermath of Voldemort's first defeat. "She jumped on one of the school brooms. Then, she and Rolanda Hooch went flying up and down the larger passageways of the school. I had to stun her to get her down from the top of the Great Hall." Dumbledore was in stitches. Despite his aura of knowing all that occurred in his school, he obviously didn't know this story.

Venus told of her sister as a young girl in the Highlands. Running in their father's fields after the kine. Meeting and falling in love with Jamie McGonagall. All the good things of her sister's life were recounted. She didn't mention Minerva's early widowhood, nor the tough financial times, which forced her to sell her and Jamie's home. In retrospect, it seemed more like an Irish wake than a Scots funeral. Harry and Daphne wrapped their arms around each other and watched the final ritual for internment. The priest spoke the familiar words known throughout Christendom, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust..."

Harry discreetly conjured a rose and handed it to Daphne. She was surprised to find her face wet with tears as they approached the graveside. She heard a sob from her side and turned to see Harry begin crying.

Behind them, the sob was repeated many times.

Daphne did her duty and tossed the rose on top of the others that coated the simple pine coffin. They passed by the family and Daphne was struck at how alike Minerva and her sister were, yet unlike.

Harry leaned on her and she on him as they made their way out of the graveyard to a small copse of woods. The privacy would hide their apparition home. She saw Dumbledore making his way off in a different direction and thanked heaven that the man wasn't as uncouth as to approach them here.

Fittingly, it began to rain. Minerva hadn't been a perfect woman, far from it. Daphne was just beginning to see how wonderful it was to be flawed. How human. She wished she'd had more time with the amazing witch that was Minerva McGonagall.

.oOo.

10 December 1996 Wednesday

"Amelia, what's the plan on pushing Voldemort?"

The Minister for Magic looked up from her breakfast of porridge and tea with a neutral expression. "What would you be referring to, my Lord Potter?"

Daphne rolled her eyes in exasperation. Sometimes Amelia would do this and play the 'I'm the Minister and you're not' card which just pissed off Daphne to the nth degree. Apparently, it annoyed Susan as well.

"Come off it Auntie. We all," she indicated to the Potters and Neville, "are in the thick of it. We're reserve Aurors activated with the sole purpose of finding and killing Death Eaters. Don't act like we don't need to know because if there's anyone on this bloody island that does need to know it's him!" By the end of her rant, Susan was quite

upset and jabbed her finger at Harry.

The other teens watched Susan with a hint of trepidation. No one liked to be on the receiving end of Susan's tongue. When she got going she could flay a person in less than thirty seconds; one of the benefits of growing up with an Auror as a guardian.

Amelia glared at her niece for a moment before chuckling and looking away. Scooping up a spoonful of porridge, she replied to Susan's rant. "Come by the office today around 1100. Circulate it to the rest of the Fifteen, I'll have Connie do a formal briefing." Fixing her eye on Susan, she addressed her with more than a bit of humour, "And you, young lady. You're not too big for me to put you over my knee if you get too sassy."

The others burst into laughter at the image of the fierce Susan Bones being spanked by her grey haired, monocle wearing Aunt.

.oOo.

Notes to the others of the Fifteen were delivered by Dobby directly after breakfast. They sent a note to Professor Dubois to beg off their Transfiguration lesson for the day, citing official conflicts. They'd found themselves having to bow out of more and more instructional time as they became deeper involved in the workings of government.

Hermione and Daphne would spend time doing independent study, but the other three had to be at various meetings, briefings and other official functions so much that Harry wondered how other members had any life outside of government.

"Being one of the Fifteen makes our jobs much more involved," Neville told him as Harry whinged after breakfast. "Even so, Gran wasn't nearly so busy in the years when Voldemort was banished." He paused and then needled his friend, "So quit whinging you wanker."

The girls began laughing while Harry's face reddened.

.00o.

Eleven o'clock came and Daphne met with Victoria for their usual luncheon while their husbands conducted business. As they were discussing where to have lunch, the door to Amelia's office opened and the Minister's executive assistant came running out.

"Oh, Lady Potter. I'm glad I caught you. The Minister would like you to sit in on the meeting."

Victoria raised her eyebrows in interest. She patted her younger friend's hand saying, "Ta, dearie. Do let me know when we can get together. I'm just dying to chat."

Daphne shook her head while she smiled at her friend. Following the executive assistant through the mahogany doors, Daphne adopted her 'hard as nails' expression that she'd worn in the Slytherin common room.

Everyone in the room knew her. Hell, she lived with half of them. The other half were more than likely to raise a stink about her presence in the room. She and Susan had talked about the older members of the Fifteen and their resistance to Susan's role as Lady Bones. At least Susan had a legitimate reason for being in the briefing.

Squaring her shoulders as she passed the lintel, Daphne remembered, So do I. I'm a badge carrying Auror with directions to kill and capture any member of the Death Eaters that I can find. I belong for that reason alone.

Entering into the enormous office, she was distinctly relieved to see a row of senior Aurors standing behind the seated members of the Fifteen. There was an empty seat next to Harry, towards which she

headed. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Jones and Boot frown, but decided to ignore them. If they don't like it, they can bugger off.

"Thank you all for attending this morning," began Amelia. "We believe we are at a critical point in our struggle with the Death Eaters and are now beginning what we hope to be the last big push of our offensive. Director Hammer, if you please?"

Connie Hammer stood, smoothed her robes and moved to a large flip chart. After touching her wand to it, columns of figures appeared.

"My Lords and Ladies, Aurors; what you see in front of you is the accounting of dead and captured Death Eaters dating back to early June."

Daphne felt Harry shift next to her. It was obvious the source of his discomfort. The start date for the chart was the battle for the Department of Mysteries. When Sirius died. Discreetly, she took his hand in hers and stroked the back with her thumb.

"As you can see by the totals listed here," she pointed to the highlighted numbers at the bottom of the chart, "Over one hundred and fifty Death Eaters have been killed in the last six months and almost sixty have been captured."

Daphne raised her eyebrows, impressed. The DMLE must have been very busy – and very secretive - with their clandestine raids.

Abbott interrupted, "Where are the captured being held? Azkaban is a sieve."

Amelia smirked at Harry for a moment before responding for Connie, "They are in an extraordinarily safe and secure facility at this time, my Lord. I'd rather not say in an open forum, but will admit that there will be a public announcement of our new corrections facility once this is all put to bed."

Abbott obviously didn't like the evasion, but after a moment of serious contemplation, nodded his acquiescence.

Regaining her bearings, Connie continued, "Historically, terrorist groups don't have membership exceeding a ratio of one quarter of one percent of the overall population that they are acting against. This is documented in the magical and mundane world as a valid assumption. The population of the United Kingdom is just under sixty two million persons, and the magical population of Britain is sixty thousand. Therefore, we can see that the Death Eater can be estimated at approximately one hundred and fifty."

There was silence as she let that fact settle in on the audience. "As I said, it's an assumption, a rule of thumb as it were. Voldemort's recruitment outside Britain explains why we've captured or killed so many above his expected followers. What our estimation does tell us is that we most likely have Voldemort on the ropes. When he attacked Hogwarts early in the morning of the Seventh, he only had ten Death Eaters with him and they were all very senior. There were no 'unknowns'. For him to attack a stronghold such as Hogwarts with only ten supporters when it is populated by Albus Dumbledore, Filius Flitwick and Minerva McGonagall is very telling indeed."

Scanning the crowd for faces that showed incomprehension, she found none. Good. "I believe that we can remove Lord Voldemort's support and draw him out for an end-game confrontation; a meeting engagement if you will. No matter what happens, the Death Eaters are not currently a threat to magical Britain. However, they must be eradicated and their leader taken or killed lest they reconstitute and begin their terror all over again."

The Aurors in the back of the room were silent and still, their lack of reaction indicative of their concurrence with their leaders sentiments. The peers in the front were a little harder to read as their reactions were mixed.

Neville and Susan appeared ready to do battle at that very moment.

Boot and Jones appeared to be in a most distasteful situation. They knew they had to be involved in this discussion which would result in blood, mayhem and gore, but would have much preferred to be anywhere else than sitting in this room and discussing this topic. Daphne dismissed them, she had less and less tolerance for fools as time passed. She didn't have time or patience for them.

Unexpectedly, she felt Harry squeeze her hand. Glancing to her left, she saw him watching her. He caught her eye, gave her his soft smile, and squeezed her hand once more.

She almost crushed him to her right there and then. He had felt her tense up and deciphered her mood from subtle clues. Clues that only a deeply involved person could notice and interpret. A deeply in love person.

Returning his smile, she turned back to Connie and the brief.

"My Lord Potter has begun the process of drawing out the Dark Lord with the article you all may or may not have read in the paper this morning."

"It was on the front page," Neville muttered.

"Quite," Amelia concurred.

"We are trying to bait Voldemort into coming out of his hole. Worst case, nothing happens and we try again. Middle case, he sends his dwindling numbers of supporters out to attempt raids. Best case, he comes himself and we string the bugger up by his heels."

"Pardon me, Director," Macmillan contradicted. "But isn't the worst case where people die?"

Connie nodded and responded without pause, "True, that is a horrible situation but there is absolutely nothing we can do about that." Running right over Macmillan's indignant retort, she baldly stated, "If I had four or five times my current Auror force, I'd still be unable to insure the safety of magical Britain, much less all of Britain. If they decide to attack and kill the Smithfields who live at 67 Oak Avenue in central Manchester, I can't stop that. Neither can the muggle authorities."

Now scowling at the peer, Connie went on, "What I can control, my Lord, is what we do. What we are doing is trying to bring the bastards to us. I've asked my Lord Potter to be the stalking horse and he has bravely agreed. Now we wait."

Turning back to the board, she touched it with her wand again and murmured, "And kill the fuckers when they come out."

.oOo.

13 December 1996 Saturday

Nothing. Not a goddamn thing. No muggle hunting, no public taunts, nothing.

"Shit," Daphne muttered as she threw down the paper on the breakfast table. Today they were going to put up their Christmas tree and finish putting up the holiday decorations all over Rowan Hill.

When she was a small child, Daphne had looked forward to decorating day more than Christmas itself. She loved the holly, pine and ivy all over the house. The wonderful aroma, the look; all of it was incomparably wonderful to the seven year old Daphne Greengrass. Distinctly, she remembered watching with wide eyes as her father levitating the tree into the house.



Sure, she loved her presents and was a paper tearing monster on the morn. Which child on the planet stood back and told their parents, "Thanks, but no," to presents? Still, the delight of the season for Daphne was found in the dressing of the house.

When she and Harry had first moved into Rowan Hill from the vacation house in the Lake District she'd wandered about the house imagining it dressed for Christmas. She couldn't wait.

This morning, she couldn't care less. Voldemort wasn't coming out of his warren. Neither were his followers. Bastards,

Strong hands began to knead her shoulders and neck, starting to dispel the tension she didn't even know had taken root there. "God, I love you Potter."

From behind her, Harry chuckled. "It looked like you were having a bit of a problem." She twisted around and mock glared at him. Laughing openly, he nodded at the wad of paper that five minutes before had been the Daily Prophet, "And that happened because you are happy with the world?"

Laying her head on the table, she let him shift his ministrations to her back. Deftly, he unhooked her bra strap and began to knead the muscles that ran down either side of her spine. The resumption of her pleased groans indicated his progress.

"Look, I know it's very serious, but the situation is completely out of our hands."

From the table, her voice was a bit muffled but clear, "When did you become all sanguine?"

Even though she couldn't see it, he shrugged. "Since I went all bonkers and had all my friends and loved ones pull me back from the edge."

Joking thrust aside, she sat up and regarded him seriously. Taking his hand in hers, she asked, "What do you mean?"

Shrugging again, he explained as best he could. "I was in this emotional vortex where no matter what I did, we were all fucked. At least that's how it seemed to me. Roland helped give me some hope, but most of all it was all of you kicking my ass that saved me." He looked down at their joined hands, "I've never had so many people tell me they love me."

Unbidden tears began to form in her eyes, which she ruthlessly suppressed. He didn't need her tears; he needed her love. Standing, she embraced him and whispered in his ear, "I love you with all that I am."

Smiling, he whispered back, "And I you, wife."

They stood there for a long moment, he savouring her presence and the tangible proof of their love. She was swearing vengeance on his relatives.

.oOo.

They did decorate the manor house that day and all had a wonderful time. Harry couldn't help but snicker when he saw the usually serious Amelia Bones singing a song to herself while wearing a crown of holly. She levitated the obligatory sprig of mistletoe to the top of the doorframe into the formal dining room, affix it with a Sticking charm and hum the parts of the song she didn't know as she headed back to the entrance hall for more decorations.

Daphne had taken it upon herself to decorate the family drawing room and had shooed everyone else out. It was her home and she was taking this very seriously. Neville had the welts from her well applied Stinging hex to attest to her dedication to the task. Stori had

stood at the doorway and teased her sister until she ran shrieking in playfulness, a charmed bucket of water in pursuit.

Harry and Neville were tasked to find an appropriate tree from the grounds of the estate. Not cut it down, mind. No cutting until they'd been given approval by the Lady Potter. Bundled up against the wind, they hiked and waded through the light snow until Neville smacked Harry on the shoulder.

Confused, Harry looked at his friend and asked, "What?"

In response, Neville shifted to The Bear and loped away.

Harry laughed, shifted to The Tiger, and took off in pursuit. Twenty minutes later, they found a suitable tree, which, after inspection and approval, they cut down and levitated back to the house.

It was late in the evening and everyone else had gone to bed. Harry and Daphne were sitting on the couch, she half laying on him while he had his feet up on the coffee table. They were staring at the Christmas tree, alit with fairy lights that spanned the rainbow and beyond in their beauty.

In the distance, Daphne heard music. Must be Susan. She said, she was going to turn on the wireless before bed.

Snuggling further into her husband, she growled appreciatively when he pulled a quilt off the back of the couch and covered the two of them.

"Stori starts with Dubois and Young on Monday?"

"Mhmm."

"What about Phillip?"

Daphne cracked open her eyes, "Hunh?"

"Maybe we should begin teaching Phillip some basics."

"Honey, he's only nine. His core isn't stable enough to cast a spell."

With a deadly earnest expression, he replied, "The Death Eaters didn't care about that last time." When she flinched, he continued in a softer tone, "Look, he may not be able to cast a Stunning spell or a Cutter, but if he knows the mechanics and has a wand, then he has a chance."

Daphne exhaled loudly. After a moment of silence, she conceded, "I'll talk to mum tomorrow."

.oOo.

15 December 1996 Monday

"My Lord Potter, he is too young to use a wand effectively."

Daphne heard Harry sigh – again – as Mr. Ollivander repeated his protestation.

"We are aware of that, Mr. Ollivander. Nevertheless, please fit Phillip for a wand."

There was a pause and Daphne hoped that this time the man would surrender and fit her brother for a wand.

"But, my Lord..."

Daphne's patience expired, so she interrupted the old man, "Mr. Ollivander! Kindly fit my brother for a wand or we shall go to Gregorovitch's? Would you like it spread around that Lord Potter had to go to the Continent to have his brother-in-law fitted for a wand?"

For a full ten seconds Mr. Ollivander regarded her coldly. With a narrowing of his eyes he turned to Phillip and asked, "Which arm is your wand arm, young sir?" To Phillip's delight, the famous tape measure jumped off the shelf and began measuring him.

It took a good twenty minutes for Phillip to have his wand find him; Maple, ten inches and Dragon Heartstring. Harry took Daphne's hand as they left, Phillip cradling the box that contained his new wand. Evelyn trailed behind the group, smiling wistfully. The Potters stopped in front of Flourish and Blott's, waiting for everyone else to catch up with them.

"Our friends still with us?" Daphne asked as she picked an imaginary bit of lint off Harry's collar.

"Mm-hmm."

They had an escort of ten Aurors under invisibility cloaks or Disillusionment charms. Three were on the rooftops keeping pace with the familial party and the other seven were spread out in the Alley. Amelia, Connie, Scrimgeour – all of them really - were hoping that they could entice at least some of the Death Eaters out.

Inside the bookstore, Evelyn and Phillip were hustled into the back room to use the Floo in order to return to Rowan Hill. Tonks was waiting for them where she did a quick examination of Evelyn's features and clothes before the older woman left. Two seconds later, Tonks had effectively replaced the Widow Greengrass and joined Harry and 'her daughter' as they browsed the books.

They picked up a half dozen books to add to the Potter Collection at Rowan Hill. A few fiction works to go with collections that were more scholarly. Daphne picked up the collector's magical edition of Jane Austen's complete works. She showed the boxed set to Harry and asked, "For Hermione?"

Harry nodded emphatically. Hermione was a devoted Jane-ite and had held forth extensively regarding, Anne, Wentworth, Lizzie, Darcy, Marianne, Eleanor, Edward and the rest of them. As they had become good friends, Hermione and Daphne had sat down one day and confided their favourite books with each other. Daphne smiled remembering Hermione, "I almost died in happiness the first time I read *Pride and Prejudice*."

Checking over her shoulder to see if Harry was watching, she scuttled into the romance section to see if her favourite author had released any new books.

Harry was leaning on the shelves, a small smile on his face when she exited said section five minutes later, two books in her hands. Her face coloured when he cocked an eyebrow at her and then deliberately looked at the books in her hands.

She sighed and pulled a face, waiting for the inevitable teasing. When none was forthcoming, she looked at her husband, seeing a confused, yet amused expression on his face. "What?" he asked.

"Just say it."

Even more confusion. "Say what?"

Now somewhat angry in her embarrassment, Daphne snapped, "Get the teasing over with."

"About those?" he asked as he nodded at *Passion's Harbour* and *The Nobleman's Wife*. When she gave him a short nod of acknowledgement, he leaned in, kissed her gently and as he pulled away, responded, "I've known about your little stories for months now."

Her face morphed into surprise, which caused him to laugh in turn.

Taking the books from her, he placed them in the basket with their other purchases. Turning to the checkout desk, he muttered, "Just channelling my inner Slytherin, dear."

She laughed as he handed over the Galleons and shrunk their purchases.

.oOo.

A still smiling Daphne was holding Harry's hand as they left the bookstore. They stopped by the apothecary for some pain relief potions, their solicitor's for a quick check on a slander lawsuit that was in progress, Eeylop's Owl Emporium for owl treats, The Leather Store where Daphne purchased three purses and the accompanying wallets all that over the course of an hour and a half and there hadn't even been a twitch from their Auror minders.

As they entered the magical optometrist to get Harry a check up, he muttered, "How come it's impossible to find a Death Eater when you really want one?"

Twenty-five minutes later they left, Harry wearing an updated set of contacts. "Come back next year, my Lord. We should be able to permanently correct your vision at that time."

They were ambling up the alley toward the Leaky Cauldron when a tap on Harry's shoulder caused him to ask, "Yes?"

They heard a bodiless voice report, "Nothing for today, go ahead and head home."

"Right. Our thanks to you and your team. I'll leave a tab at the Cauldron so you all can warm up."

"Thank you, my Lord. That's very kind."

Harry nodded as they continued up the alley, "Right then, 'til next time."

After Harry dropped twenty Galleons on the bar and told Tom whom they were for, he gave Daphne a nod. With a double pop-pop, they apparated home. Another fruitless fishing expedition completed.

.oOo.

16 December 1996 Tuesday

Daphne had just stepped out of the shower and wrapped a bath sheet about her when Harry dragged himself into their bathroom. They had a dinner party on their schedule for the evening, yet another attempt to entice Voldemort out of hiding.

Roland and Harry had been in the Room of Pain for the bulk of the afternoon and it showed. Harry had a crust of dried blood on his forehead, a bruise on his neck and was limping. All that was buried under his wide smile, though.

"I beat him."

With wide eyes, she asked the obvious question, "Roland?"

He nodded in response, letting himself fall onto the chair in front of Daphne's vanity. She hurried over and gave him a tender kiss, "That's wonderful!" She paused and evaluated him, "Do you need a bit of healing?"

With a chagrined smile, he nodded.

She retrieved her wand from the counter and began to cast the various spells they'd learned from Remus. Ten minutes later Harry was climbing in the shower to get ready for the evening, feeling much better.



Daphne watched him with a tender expression as he attempted to croon an Elvis song, Can't Help Falling in Love. About forty minutes before, he'd been a fight for his life against a man of whom she was terrified of crossing wands. Now, he was crooning – quite badly – a love song for her.

"I love you Harry Potter," she whispered.

.oOo.

"Neville, Susan!" Daphne exclaimed. She hadn't seen the other two since the previous Friday. They'd been doing the rounds with Lady Augusta. Every Christmas season for the last one hundred and ten years, the now Dowager Lady Longbottom had visited all the tenants on the Longbottom lands. She would usually distribute small gifts to them all, but this year, Neville did the visiting and distributing with his Grandmother in the background.

Susan and Daphne bussed each other's cheeks and Neville bowed over her hand after. She was truly glad to see her best friends; she'd missed them quite a bit over the past four days.

"Where's Harry?" Neville asked.

"Drinks."

"Ah."

"So how did the visiting go?" she asked Neville as she wrapped her arm in Susan's.

Neville's expression became thoughtful for a long moment before he answered, "Informative."

Daphne frowned at the unexpected response. "How so?"

Neville glanced about to see if there was anyone listening in on their conversation. "Seeing how the bulk of the country lives. Between Green Hills and Rowan Hill, I think I have a skewed understanding of how people live. Many of our tenants have three or four children and they live in three or four bedroom homes. Some of them are in tighter quarters. Granted, they're all magical homes so they've used Space Expansion charms and runic expansions to maximize the space they have, but still..." he faded away.

"Neville, Susan!" Harry exclaimed as he returned. Handing Daphne her glass of punch, he shook Neville's hand and bowed over Susan's.

The conversation became derailed as Harry launched into a discussion of the timid Italian Count and his boorish English wife who'd waylaid him earlier in the evening.

Susan brought up Hermione and Bill's recent date. Bill had taken their mutual friend to the theatre after a meal at a Greek Restaurant.

Harry's expression started to cloud over and so too did Neville's. Daphne surreptitiously pinched the inside of her husband's arm to get his attention. She shook her head minutely to which Harry sighed and then nodded. He doesn't like it, but he'll leave it alone.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a similar interaction between Susan and Neville, causing Daphne to smile. She wondered how long it would take for Neville to formalize their relationship. Not necessarily marriage; she realized that she and Harry were the extraordinary exception to the rule regarding teenage romances. Ninety nine percent of them did not survive. It looked like Neville and Susan might also beat the percentages as well.

Daphne glanced around the room and counted as Harry told the humorous story; fifteen Aurors plus Connie Hammer and Rufus

Scrimgeour. Somehow, she didn't think they'd be needed this evening; Voldemort wasn't coming.

Bastard.

.oOo.

20 December 1996 Saturday

"Have I completely lost my mind?"

Harry goggled at his wife, the fork laden with eggs halfway to his mouth. "Er, could you clarify, please?"

Daphne sat back in her chair at the breakfast table. They were alone at the table as Neville and Susan had apparated to Green Hills after their workout. Lady Augusta was feeling unwell and they wanted to spend the day with her.

Amelia hadn't been in the house when they'd awakened at 0530. She'd been putting in eighteen-hour days for a few months now. Harry had tried to talk to her about slowing down a bit and as a result, had seen a side of Amelia that none of them, bar Susan, had ever seen before: Auror Bones. After she'd finished dressing down the Potter Lord, she'd immediately apologized for her 'atrocious behaviour' and surprised all gathered by giving Harry a hug.

It hadn't stopped her from working exceedingly long hours, though.

"Every time we go out to a party or shopping or whatever, I keep wanting Voldemort to show up. I want the snake-faced idiot to show up! Who in their right mind wants Voldemort to come to the party?"

Harry swallowed the eggs he'd scooped up. Before he could say anything, Daphne spoke up, "I know what you're going to say. 'It's just nerves' right?"

He opened his mouth but she ran right over him, "It's not. It's like Christmas Eve. Anticipation in a good way." Narrowing her eyes, she thought about her statement, "No, that's not really it. It's like a loose tooth."

Harry set his fork down, sipped his tea and waited for his wife to regain her sanity.

"Right now, the tooth is all wiggly, right? I know it'll come out any moment now and I can't wait. It feels...uncomfortable and I want that feeling gone. I want to get on with it and get the new tooth in to replace the loose one." She looked at Harry with an expression that was surprisingly anxious.

He sat back in his chair, obviously taking her more seriously than he was when they started the conversation. "I understand what you mean. I want this," he waved in the general direction over his head. "I want what's up there waiting to drop on my head and brain me to be gone."

Nodding in relief, she exhaled loudly before bestowing her knee-watering smile on her husband. Many years later, he'd tell her that every time she smiled at him like that, his heart went pitter-patter, no matter how long they'd been together.

"Thanks."

"Anytime, Daph."

.oOo.

21 December 1996 Sunday

Connie Hammer stood at an enlarged flipchart again, this time for a very different reason.

"We're going to take Malfoy Manor this evening."

That got everyone's attention. The four friends were in attendance with Remus and Tonks standing behind Harry while Hermione and Bill were next to Susan. Besides the informal Potter strike group, over one hundred Aurors were in the room, most were veterans of the attack in Diagon Alley.

"Our curse breaking team led by Mr. Weasley," she indicated to Bill who stonily endured everyone turning to see him, "Will bring down the wards at exactly 2 AM. Our fire teams will then portkey directly to the front hall, the rear veranda, the dining hall and the front lawn. See the chart on the wall for your assignments. We have a recent visitor to the Manor enchanting the portkeys, so they'll be accurate."

She didn't say it, but Daphne knew that Tonks had been pouring over maps with Connie and Scrimgeour the day before.

Connie indicated a large wall chart that designated the fire teams. With a combined thrill and tremble, Daphne saw that the eight man team that was to portkey into the dining hall was led by Harry with Daphne, Susan, Neville, Remus, Tonks, Hermione and Bill in support. Harry needed to be at the front of the attack in case Voldemort was in residence. Since Harry was in the front, his team needed to be with him in order to protect him.

After explaining necessary details such as communication spells to be used, call signs, ingress/egress routes, search areas of responsibility, rendezvous points and the like, Connie finished up with, "The next room has a hundred or so cots with a sleeping potion on each pillow. I suggest you avail yourselves of the chance to catch some sleep. You'll be roused no later than midnight for a quick meal and then transport to the jump off points."

Looking around the room she asked, "Are there any questions?"

When no one spoke, Connie nodded with an air of finality. "Godspeed," she muttered.

.oOo.

Daphne sat on the edge of her cot in the semi-darkened room. Most of the Aurors had unceremoniously knocked back their sleeping draught and collapsed on the cot, barely bothering to kick off their boots. She and Harry had chatted about inconsequential things before he too was taken to the land of Nod.

Now she sat on her cot, staring at nothing while she shook. The last time they'd been to Malfoy Manor they'd had a less than pleasant experience.

She sighed. To be truthful, they'd had their asses kicked.

Hospital stays for she and Harry along with medical attention for Neville, Susan, Remus and Tonks had been necessary.

The pain was a hazy memory. She'd heard it told that a human mind cannot remember pain. It can remember that there was pain, or even that the pain was extreme. However, the pain itself is an obscure memory at best. Fortunately, she agreed. That Bludgeoning hex had done a number on her knee that she'd rather not repeat.

Her cot shifted as Susan sat next to her. Wordlessly, the redhead wrapped her arm around her friend and they sat there in silence for a bit. Eventually, Susan murmured, "Remembering?"

"Yeah."

"Wasn't much fun last time, was it?"

Daphne only shook her head.

With a ghost of a smile, Susan indicated all the sleeping Aurors and said in a teasing voice, "But we have all these bad-asses with us this time. They've got Erumpent fluid bombs, enchanted spears, big fucking rocks, sharp sticks..."

By the end of Susan's humorous tirade, Daphne was chuckling as she leaned into her friend. "Thanks," she whispered.

"Anytime, my friend."

.oOo.

They were dressed in their usual black fatigues. Hermione, Susan and Daphne had just charmed their hair into tight plaits while Tonks morphed her hair into a one-inch buzz cut. Harry was tightening the belt that held his short sword, a weapon that Roland had mercilessly drilled him how to use. Neville was leaning against the wall; eyes closed and head down. Remus was next to the Longbottom of Longbottom, his arms crossed across his chest and face impassive.

A horn sounded and they all straightened up. Picking up the rope portkey, they waited. Overhead, glowing numbers were counting down from one hundred.

Forty-five.

There was no playful banter like there had been before Diagon Alley. Remus and Harry had almost been killed there and the group had learned that battle was to be taken seriously or you may never come home.

Twenty.

Blindly, Daphne reached out for Harry's free hand. Finding it was finding her tether to reality, her lifeline. She briefly closed her eyes

and sighed in relief. If he makes it out with me, I can deal with anything else.

Eight.

One last squeeze of his hand and she returned her free hand to the portkey.

Another horn sounded and they were pulled into the vortex of the portkey.

.oOo.

They only had to wait thirty minutes at the rendezvous point. The curse breaking team had immediately proceeded to the Manor upon the ending of the brief. Bill had pocketed a few vials of Pepper-up on the way out, "I'm going to need these," he murmured as he passed by Daphne.

Harry's eyes had widened and then he'd looked away when he saw the passionate kiss the eldest Weasley and Hermione shared before Bill left. Daphne had rolled her eyes and led her husband into the next room.

The teams had been given a five-minute standby when the curse breakers got close to dropping the wards. Team Tiger, as the Potter led team was designated, manned up and lifted their new rope portkey in preparation for their jump.

Daphne looked out at the rows of teams waiting for the jump. Teams Lion, Bear, Eagle, Hawk and Shark all stood silently, watching the tight knot of men and women assaulting the wards.

It was evident when they were successful.

A bright flash followed closely by a loud gong indicated the wards



were down. A second later, they all heard Scrimgeour's voice shouting, "GO! GO! GO!"

She saw Bill quaffing his potion as he ran up to them, the steam pouring out of his ears. As soon as he grabbed the rope with his non-wand hand, Harry activated the portkey.

It was a short ride this time and when the group arrived in the empty dining hall of Malfoy Manor they began to fan out. Tonks and Susan had point and moved to the door. A nod from Harry and the fierce fighters led the way through the doorway facing opposite directions. Daphne and Neville were next and as Daphne exited the dining hall to support Susan, she saw the hallway was empty.

A quick, "Ssst!" from Harry caused Susan and Daphne to turn and follow the now advancing rest of the team. From the entry hall, they heard a brief burst of spellfire but then nothing. The sound keyed them up, but, so far, there was no one in their sector. Quickly they moved to clear their floor finding no one in the kitchens except for two half-starved house elves.

They stunned the elves to insure they wouldn't tell their master about the presence of the teams and moved on in the search. 'No one home' was the conclusion at which, they quickly arrived. Harry paused after they checked the library, held up his hand and listened to the communicator in his ear. After a long moment, he said in a normal tone of voice, "Nobody home except one KIA. Move to the primary egress rendezvous. Tonks, take point. Remus, rear-guard. Stay frosty everyone; just in case."

Moving to the entry hall, they saw the broken body of Draco Malfoy on the floor. His wand was wrecked in his hand and his face twisted in a frenzy of hate.

"So there you are little ferret," Daphne murmured to herself. By all accounts, Malfoy the younger had not participated in the raid earlier

in the month at Hogwarts, which had spurred no end of speculation on the reason.

Harry, Daphne, Hermione, Neville and Susan agreed that Draco was too inept for Voldemort to bring him along in an assault. He'd probably freeze when it mattered most or worse, accidentally kill those on his own side. Nonetheless, he'd not been seen since escaping from Azkaban and the team wondered about his activities.

"Boot will be happy," Harry commented softly to no one.

She nodded in agreement while she headed out to the egress portkey on the front lawn. Damn you Voldemort! Come out!

.oOo.

24 December 1996 Wednesday

Daphne was tucking a present for Amelia under the tree when Astoria came in the family sitting room and sat on the sofa. As Daphne placed the other three presents for Susan, Neville and Phillip under the tree, she saw Stori watching her and fidgeting with a handkerchief in her hands.

Straightening up, Daphne crossed to the couch, sat down and began to gently rub her sister's back. Without asking, Daphne reached out with her free hand and took her sister's hand, giving it a quick squeeze of reassurance.

Astoria was a pretty young woman. Much like her older sister, she had dark hair - borderline black - with pale blue eyes as opposed to her sister's electric blue. She, like her sister, had a lean athletic build. Right now, her face was preoccupied. Astoria was the deep thinker of the family. Daphne was all about intelligence in action. Phillip was the athlete.

Astoria, however, had a contemplative nature. She enjoyed botany, potions and philosophy; the passive arts if you will. The more active wanded arts were a necessary evil as far as she was concerned and only learned enough to get her high grade. To say that she did not savour the fine art of Transfiguration like her sister would be an understatement. All this led to the fact that it was not unusual to see the middle child of the Greengrass family deep in contemplation about matters great and small. However, this time, Daphne could tell something was bothering her sister.

Stroking Stori's smaller hand, Daphne eventually asked, "What's bothering you?"

Astoria silently shrugged which Daphne took as a bad sign. "Is it because of Father?" This was their first Christmas since their father had been murdered.

Scrunching up her face in a noncommittal expression caused Daphne to snort in an exasperated fashion. "Stori, I'm not a legilimencer. You need to actually speak for us to have a discussion."

They sat there watching the tree for a bit before Astoria explained. "I'm conflicted. Part of me misses Father and wants him here. Another part of me," she paused and took a deep breath. "The other part of me is glad he's gone." She finished in a small voice, "And I'm pretty ashamed of that."

Daphne was silent for a moment, just holding her sister close as she sniffled a bit. "I feel the same way," she eventually admitted.

"R-really?"

Daphne nodded. "I've been telling poor Harry all about it the past few days. He's not very sympathetic for Father, though."

Stori gave a short laugh. Harry's opinion of the late Cyrus

Greengrass was well known in the family.

"He's reminded me many times that he doesn't think less of me for the mess of my feelings. He loves me and I love you, Stori. It's Ok. Despite Father's behaviour, he was still our father and I think, it's somewhat appropriate to miss him. Lady Augusta told me that it's the sign of adulthood to hold two beliefs that seem to contradict each other."

Stori nodded and was silent. "Is there any thing I can do to help?" Daphne asked.

With a small smile, Stori replied, "Well, I was thinking of inviting Patrick to dinner this evening."

Smiling widely now, Daphne asked, "This is the Ravenclaw boy you fancy?" Blushing, Astoria nodded. "Alright then. Write up the invitation and I'm sure that Dobby or Nob will deliver it for you."

When Astoria opened her mouth to speak, Daphne added with a smile, "And I'll tell Harry not to give your Patrick an interrogation of his intentions."

.oOo.

25 December 1996 Thursday

The presents in the morning had been opened with little fanfare. Daphne'd noticed Harry watching everyone else more than opening his gifts. He was prodded by Phillip to catch up to the rest of them, but it seemed to Daphne that he was enjoying being a part of the celebration more so than the gifts.

Although he gave great gifts.

When Daphne opened the slim box he'd given her, her breath

stuttered. Inside was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. A diamond and sapphire necklace with accompanying bracelet and earrings which glowed with beauty. "Oh, Harry..."

"Do you like them?" his worried question sounded in her ear. He'd snuck up behind her while she was opening the box.

"Magnificent doesn't even come close."

She felt his tension ebb and he wrapped his arms around her from behind. "Good. You deserve nothing less."

That evening, Daphne sat at the foot of the table in the formal dining room. The Bones, Longbottom and Greengrass families along with Filius Flitwick, Connie Hammer, George Stebbins and Rufus Scrimgeour had joined the Potters for their Christmas dinner.

Dobby and Nob had been cooking and cleaning all day. Daphne had become much better at planning a major dinner so she decided to branch out a bit on the menu.

She decided to start with medallions of goat cheese accompanied by roasted kalamata olives with fennel shavings and lemon, and go from there. All in all, it looked to be a wonderful evening.

The dinner party was lively. Most of the guests were friends or close enough to be family so there wasn't the stilted discussion of people who are forced together trying to make conversation last.

In his usual miniature tuxedo, Dobby appeared at the door to the main drawing room and announced, "My Lord, dinner is served."

Harry escorted Susan to her seat while Daphne took Neville's arm. Guests paired up and continued their conversation to the table and beyond.

Remove after remove went smashingly. During the main course, Daphne looked down the table and saw Harry dabbing at his eyes. She frowned in concern, which he caught. With a watery smile, he waved her off, returning to his discussion with Lady Augusta.

Eventually, the half of the guests that didn't live at Rowan Hill bid the residents adieu and headed home. Silently, Harry took his wife's hand and led her up to their suite.

Closing the door, he smoothly prevented her from raising the lights. "No," he murmured.

Gently, he unzipped her robes and let them fall. Stepping back for a quick minute, he did the same for himself. They both kicked off their shoes and moved back to each other. "This has been one of the best days of my life, Daphne. I have you to thank for it. You have brought so much to my life that my heart wants to burst. I wish that I had words to tell you how much you mean to me."

His teary expression from earlier now explained, she wrapped her arms around him. Their bare skin slid against each other like satin. Quickly, they moved to the bed and made love like the young lovers they were. She called his name in her passion and he hers. Afterwards, they folded against each other, fitting together in a different way. It warmed their hearts in the same way that it did that first time they slept together back in July. Life was perfect for the moment and Daphne forced herself to stay awake as long as she could that Christmas evening of 1996 so the day wouldn't end.

.oOo.

26 December 1996 Friday

On Boxing Day, they made the rounds. In the morning, they popped to each home of the Fifteen to wish them joy of the season. As expected, the Macmillan and Abbott visits were enjoyable and long.

The Jones and Boot visits were short. They didn't even shed their cloaks.

After a plain lunch ("I don't think I could eat anything rich after last night's feast!" exclaimed Evelyn), they headed over to the Granger home.

Bundled up against the cold, they apparated to the back garden of the Granger home. They'd been there often enough that visualizing their destination wasn't hard. On top of it, the Grangers had keyed them into the wards. Daphne felt quite touched by the compliment. So far as she was aware, only the four friends and Hermione were allowed to apparate or use the Floo to come to their home.

They must have heard the pop of apparition as Alice Granger opened the back door and waved them over, "Welcome! Happy Christmas!"

The Potters smiled and returned the waves as they made their way to the door. Coming in, they handed their coats, gloves and mufflers to Alice and gratefully took the warm mugs of tea from Steven.

"Hermione's just run to the grocer, she'll be home soon. Come, sit in the lounge and tell us about your Christmas."

It was quite ironic to Daphne. The last time they'd sat in this room with the elder Grangers, the Potters had been trying to convince the Grangers, who were complete strangers, to keep their daughter in school. It hadn't been the friendliest of conversations.

Now, six months later, they were having a very friendly conversation, Hermione had willingly left Hogwarts and the elder Grangers were friends of theirs. Amazing how things can change so quickly.

As they were all laughing over the stuffy, stodgy behaviour of the Boots, Daphne heard the door open and Hermione call out, "Mum! Dad! They didn't have the hazelnut roast so I got the Kenyan. It was

only a pound more, hope that's alright."

Steven's eyes lit up at the description of the new coffee and he bounced out of his chair to claim Hermione's purchase. A few murmurs were followed by an exclamation. "Really?" A quick pattering of feet preceded Hermione's entrance into the room, pulling her jacket off as she came.

"Happy Christmas!" she squealed as she first vigorously embraced Harry and then Daphne.

Daphne enjoyed the afternoon. She and Harry were allowed to be teenagers hanging out with their good friend and her parents. They talked about their educational futures, professional options in the magical world and finally, Quidditch.

Steven was a huge footie fan – Arsenal was his club – and the idea of Quidditch fascinated him. Quickly, Harry and Daphne were involved in an in depth explanation of the game along with promises to take him to the next Puddlemere match. Daphne could hear Hermione rolling her eyes at her friends and father. Poor thing, she was missing so much of the culture and excitement that was professional Quidditch.

Once they got past Quidditch, Steven and Alice were both intrigued by the Fifteen and their role in the Wizengamot. "This Fifteen of yours sounds quite a bit like how the House of Lords used to function."

Hermione sipped at the fresh coffee her father had brewed and nodded her head in agreement. "Very much."

"So that's what you're going to do for a career, Harry? Work in government?" Alice asked.

Harry paused before he responded. Finally, his face cleared and he told the elder female Granger, "I really haven't thought too much



about our futures beyond the war. That is such an immediate issue that is fairly consuming."

He took a sip of his own coffee before continuing, "There's a lot of legislated bigotry and oppression in Magical Britain that is quite disgusting, to tell the truth. As Black and Potter, along with Neville and Susan, I can affect real reform. Legislatively, that is. The Ministry still needs to enforce the laws, but that is a whole different issue."

Hermione said nothing, merely leaned back in her chair, a contemplative expression on her face.

They stayed for dinner, which was a fun affair. They were having leftovers from the Granger Christmas Dinner, which comprised mainly of the remains of an enormous goose and all the accoutrements therein. Hermione told the rather humorous stories from the night before when her cousins, Aunts, and Uncles from Steven's side visited. They weren't as socially inept as the Dursleys, but very close.

As the Potters bundled up after dinner to head home, Hermione asked, "Are you planning to attend the New Years Ball?"

Daphne nodded. The Ministry New Years Ball was an annual event that was one of the most coveted invitations in magical Britain. It was invariably a fun night and only the crème de la crème were invited. Neither Potter asked how Hermione had wrangled an invitation. It was fairly easy when one is a close friend of four of the Fifteen and the sitting Minister.

"Bill your date?"

Hermione cocked an eyebrow at Harry's question.

Holding his hands out in front of himself, Harry protested, "Hey, I've been good. I haven't threatened to hex his bits or anything like that. I

was just curious, that's all." When both women regarded him with jaded expressions, he reiterated, "I was just asking!"

Hermione began laughing and answered her oldest friend, "Yes, Bill is my date."

Smiling, Daphne took Harry's arm and bid Hermione farewell. "I'll get him home before he does do something stupid."

"Harry? I don't think that's possible."

"Him do something stupid?"

"No, anyone stopping it."

Both women laughed at Harry's mock put-upon expression. Daphne steered him out the back door into the snowfall with a, "Bye," for Hermione.

.oOo.

31 December 1996 Wednesday

Daphne was putting the last touches on her makeup when she heard Susan call out, "Daphne? You in there?"

"Back here!"

A moment later, Susan strode into Daphne's dressing room holding a long velvet case in her hand. She was finished dressing and had her hair up in a similar style as Daphne.

Holding out the case, Susan asked, "Could you hook this? I can't get the damn clasp."

Opening the case, Daphne smiled. Inside was a beautiful diamond

necklace that complimented the drop diamond earrings Susan was wearing. "A gift from Neville?" Daphne asked as she closed the catch on the necklace.

The back of Susan's neck coloured a bit when she nodded. Daphne held in her laughter, but her expression was of restrained mirth. When Susan turned around, Daphne asked, "So when's he going to ask you?"

Susan's face went blank. "Ask me what?"

Daphne rolled her eyes at her friend. Straightening the necklace a touch, she clarified, "Ask you to marry him."

Now the flush was beet red. "He hasn't," Susan mumbled.

"Has he told you he loves you?"

If anything, Susan's blush intensified when she nodded.

"Good. He told us a few months ago that he loved you." Shaking her finger in a mock scolding fashion, she continued, "He needs to get a move on though. We want you two to have a massive wedding to drown out our lack of one. Maybe the society gossip columnist in Witch Weekly will get off our back then."

Now the friends were laughing. "I'll be sure to pass that on to my beloved."

With a lingering smile, Daphne asked, "Do you love him?"

Susan was suddenly serious and answered, "With all that I am."

Giving a short nod, Daphne said, "Good. You two deserve each other. Come on, the boys are probably getting antsy. Harry hates being late. Even fashionably late, he wants to be on time."

As the brunette and redhead made their way to the entrance hall to apparate to the Ministry Atrium, Susan baldly stated, "Tonight would be an attractive target for snake lips."

Daphne considered as she lifted her dress hem so as not to trip on the steps. "True. However, the security for this is going to be incredible. Every Auror in Britain will be there either as a guest or on duty. No one in their right mind would attack tonight."

"Who said Voldemort's in his right mind?"

That chilling thought sent a shiver down Daphne's spine.

A/N

1. I own nothing. Rats.

2. Thanks to all who have reviewed. Thanks also to Tumshie who pointed out an error in chapter 14. Snowden is the tallest mountain in Wales. The tallest mountain in the UK is Ben Nevis in Scotland. My apologies to all...

3. Yes, the ritual "Judging of the Damned" sounds similar to "Curse of the Damned" by Melindaleo. However, the ritual is very different from hers in her excellent fic. It's just hard to come up with a cool name for a curse that is also intuitively obvious what it does. I could have called it 'Klatu, Verata, Nichto' but that would have just confused people. And I would have forgotten the last word.

4. Thanks to Worldmaker for the Christmas dinner menu! (He's a chef, I blow stuff up for a living so I defer to his superior knowledge.) Here's the entire dinner:

Appetizer: Medallions of goat cheese accompanied by roasted kalamata olives with fennel shavings and lemon

Soup: Tomato-basil crab bisque

Premiere: Seared autumn-spiced sea scallops

Main: Butter-poached lobster tails with caviar mousse and Dijon mustard sauce

Cheese: Emmental, Morbier and Bleu d'Auvergne cheeses accompanied by roasted hazelnuts, sweet cherry jam and fresh baguette

Dessert: Molten chocolate tart topped with fresh whipped cream

5. Recommendation for this chapter is Harry Potter and the Ascension of Ra by Apocalypse Thou. Very enjoyable HP/Smallville crossover. Check it out.

6. Very close to the end now. Thanks to everyone who stuck by this story while I pounded out the novella that was chapter 3 of Harry and Gabi.

## Chapter 16

31 December 1996 Wednesday

The Ministry New Year's Eve Ball was actually quite fun. They'd arrived in the Atrium of the Ministry to find it overgrown with guests dressed in the best clothes, Aurors in their dress robes, medals clinking against their chests and a whole host of functionaries assisting the highest of Wizarding society to the party.

Daphne took Harry's proffered arm and nodded her greeting to Kingsley Shacklebolt, the on duty Auror at the coat check station. Moving through the atrium to the grand hall took the four friends over a half hour as they were stopped by persons they did and did not know.

"My Lady," greeted an older, heavysset man. The man looked pointedly to Neville, with whom he'd been talking to moments before.

"Oh, right. Lady Potter this is Sir Robert Mathison. His family and ours have had common interests for generations." Neville's introduction was a bit hasty as Susan was whispering something in his ear that caused him slowly to turn beet red.

Turning to Sir Robert, Daphne left her two friends to their public/private flirtations. "My Lady," began Sir Robert, "I've wanted to meet you and your husband since your most creditable action in Diagon Alley. It's good to see the youth of our country stepping forward in difficult times. Far too often, the community relies on a hero or heroine to save the day. Usually, all that's needed is good, decent people who are willing to work a bit." With a pleasant expression, Daphne waited for the baronet to get to his point.

Sir Robert cleared his throat and continued, "Yes, well. I am the chairman of Mother Wilma's Magical Orphanage in southern Wales."

Daphne's eyes lit up. Now she knew what Sir Robert wanted and she was not averse to discussing funding for this effort. He outlined their current status, both child-wise and financially. Daphne listened with real interest, to both understand and assess the status of Mother Wilma's but also to learn a bit from this obviously experienced man.

"So, to finish my Lady, I'd like to solicit an appointment with you in your status as the head of BP Charities. I feel that, together, we can help our greater British magical community."

Daphne gave the older man an approving sort of smile and extended her hand. "Sir Robert, I believe that we can meet to discuss the betterment of our community and Mother Wilma's. Please owl me tomorrow and I shall respond immediately with an available time." The baronet smiled broadly, bowed over Daphne's gloved hand and wished her good evening.

Turning, she saw Harry surrounded by reporters asking all sorts of questions ranging from Voldemort ("You really should ask the Minister or Director Hammer about all that,") charity work ("You really should ask Lady Potter about that, she runs BP Charity Group,") and politics (the only topic he'd directly answer – sort of).

He caught her eye and gave her a little smile while nodding toward the grand hall. Nodding her understanding, Daphne hooked on to Neville and asked, "My Lord Longbottom, my husband has abandoned me for the Fourth Estate. Would you and Lady Bones agree to escort poor old me to the party?"

Neville and Susan both laughed. The three of them darted away as the reporters noticed them and began to descend on them like locusts. Neville threw back his shoulders in a preening pose. In a snobby, Malfoy-like drawl he pronounced, "I'm the biggest man here. I have the two most beautiful witches in Britain on my arms. All bow down and worship me."

Both Susan and Daphne groaned. Susan poked her boyfriend in the ribs causing him to yelp and twist away from her seeking finger. "Yeah, let's see you now 'Mr. Biggest-Man-Here'."

They chuckled and headed for one of the bars. They four friends had discussed Susan's dire prediction and decided to stay away from alcohol this evening. Fruit juice mixers provided thirst quenching and the obligatory glass in hand the function required.

Daphne was drinking from her cranberry drink when she saw Harry winding his way through the crowd. He was definitely exasperated. Daphne gave him a sad sort of smile and handed him an orange juice on ice.

He took a deep draught and muttered, "Needs something a bit stronger after that interrogation." She laughed at her husband and the four friends began to chat with Connie Hammer who'd just passed by.

A hour and a half later, Daphne felt like she'd talked more during the evening than she'd ever talked during her entire life. The gossip columnist for Witch Weekly cornered her and Susan for an even thirty minutes and quizzed them on various topics. When the annoying woman finally went her way, Daphne turned to Susan and asked, "Is it just me or do you want a double shot of Firewhiskey as well?"

Susan growled, sipped her juice and answered, "It's not just you, trust me."

Daphne saw her husband and Neville discussing something with Sir Edward Grey when Susan took her hand. Turning to her redheaded friend, Daphne saw Susan's face was strangely earnest.

"This may sound very odd, but I'm eternally grateful that Oak Park Hall was burnt down."



It did sound strange, but Daphne held her tongue. Susan obviously had something of import to say.

"We didn't know each other at all at school. But, because they burnt down my home, I've got to know you." Susan gave Daphne's hand a squeeze and said, "You're my best friend, you know that?"

Daphne smiled widely and gave her friend a big hug. "You're my best friend as well." She stepped back and gave Susan an impish smile, "Well, best friend that I don't have sex with."

Susan rolled her eyes and blew a raspberry at the brunette. They both laughed but when they calmed, Daphne reassured her friend. "Joking aside, you are as close to me as anyone outside Harry ever has or ever will. You and Astoria are my sisters, Neville my brother and I see us being like this the rest of our lives."

This pronouncement caused another hug, which was broken up by the bandleader announcing the first song. The band played a 'big band' style of music from the 1940's. Horns, drums and even a guitar blared out catchy tunes.

Daphne was listening to a song, watching the dancers and tapping her foot to the beat when a pair of arms encircled her from behind. She smiled and said, "You'd best shove off. My husband will be here momentarily and he's quite jealous." The man kissed her exposed neck causing Daphne to add in an undertone, "And an unparalleled lover."

Harry chuckled, "Dance, love?"

"I'd hoped you'd ask."

Harry led her out on to the dance floor and began to lead her in a very intricate dance step. Once she got over her surprise, she

commented, "You've been holding out on me, Potter."

He gave her his lopsided smile that melted her insides and answered, "Susan's been teaching me."

"I'll have to thank her."

They danced the night away. Not only was it incredibly fun, but it also kept the leeches and vultures away. They switched partners with Neville and Susan, Remus and Tonks, as well as, Bill and Hermione.

About eleven thirty, the friends were taking a breather in a corner of the room. Daphne was leaning back into Harry's embrace while she, Susan and Hermione discussed their current topic in Runes. Harry, Tonks and Neville were debating Puddlemere's chances against Ballycastle in the Quidditch match the next day while Bill and Remus chatted about various topics, getting to know each other better.

"Ah-hem."

Simultaneously, they all turned to the sound of the voice and saw Albus Dumbledore, resplendent in navy blue robes with comets dashing across his chest and arms.

Great. This is just what we need.

"My Lords, my Ladies. Everyone."

Mumbled greetings from the friends met the old man's words. His blue eyed gaze held Remus for a long moment before offering, "I won't keep you. I just wanted to wish you all a happy New Year. I trust your Christmas was happy?"

He smiled pleasantly when all present nodded. "Well, then, I'm off. Good evening."

Daphne watched the old man wander off through the crowds. Turning to ask Remus what the long look was about, she was preempted by Remus' low laughter as he watched the old man move away.

"Alright, I give. What was that all about and why are you laughing Moony?" Harry asked in a genial tone.

Daphne frowned. She wasn't feeling very charitable. Anyone who was on good terms with Dumbledore was, at least, suspect in her eyes.

Remus sighed. "He and I had a very pointed discussion soon after I began teaching you at Rowan Hill."

Daphne's eyebrows crooked, as did Susan's when she looked at her friend.

"It was as you foresaw, Harry. He asked me to spy on you and try and persuade you of a few things that I could not stomach."

"Like getting me to the place where you and Tonks live."

"True."

Daphne's voice was hard enough to cut, "And dissolve our marriage."

Remus met her gaze, unafraid. "That as well, yes."

"I assume you told him no," Daphne stated.

"We almost dueled, I was so enraged."

That surprised Daphne. Remus was such a mild and agreeable man that for him to reach the end of his tether like that, well, Dumbledore must have pushed very hard indeed.

"Thanks, Remus." Harry offered.

After a short bow from the neck, Remus answered, "I could do nothing less for you, Harry." Looking Daphne in the eye, he added, "and you, too, Daphne."

Daphne didn't have any uncles, but at that moment, Remus took on that role for her until the day he died. She gave him the broad smile that she reserved for those she loved and nodded in return.

The band had stopped playing and the band leader took the microphone, "All right everyone! Thirty seconds to midnight!"

Daphne wrapped her arms around Harry's neck and began to kiss him like there was no tomorrow. She felt every part of him as she pressed herself against him. His arms cradled her as he kissed her with an equal passion.

"Five...four...three...two...one...HAPPY NEW YEAR!"

The band kicked off a raucous rendition of "Auld Lang Syne" while the crowd cheered. The Potters broke their kiss, and embraced briefly. "Love you," Daphne whispered.

"Love you too," he answered.

Turning to their friends, they gave chaste hugs and kisses, wishing each other a happy new year. As Daphne embraced Tonks, she stiffened. Tonks froze as well and when Daphne asked, "Are those screams?" the Auror only nodded.

The friends turned as one toward the entry that led to the atrium. Spellfire and screams sounded.

"Crap."

.oOo.

Daphne stood next to Harry, surveying the scene of chaos in the Ministry Atrium. There were over three hundred people running around screaming. Sporadically, spellfire would cut down one or two of the screaming crowd, spraying blood and gore, inciting the panicked crowd further.

"Why don't they get out?" Daphne asked.

"Wide area Confundus," replied Remus, scanning the crowd.

All around them, Aurors plowed into the crowd, looking for Death Eaters. She saw Karen Averis, an older Auror, scowling as she drew her wand and scanned the crowd. All the Aurors were looking for the distinctive black robes and mask of the Death Eaters. As Daphne watched, Karen was cut in half by a Slashing curse. Just beyond her, another Auror that Daphne recognized was felled by a Reductor curse to the head.

Aurors were dropping like flies as the noise of the crowd swelled. "They're using the crowd as cover," scowled Susan.

"MOVE!" shouted someone from behind.

Despite the difficulty of moving agilely in an evening dress, Daphne and the others scuttled to the right as four Aurors ran to the edge of the crowd. Each had the Bubble Head charm activated and began tossing potion vials into the crowd.

As the vials shattered, they released a gas that caused those nearby to drop to the floor, unconscious.

Daphne felt a wand tap on top of her head and her eyesight was obscured for a moment. Realizing that someone had cast the Bubble Head charm on her, she murmured, "Thanks," as she kept scanning

for targets.

A magical wind began whipping through the Atrium, dispersing the Sleeping gas. All told, maybe ten or fifteen people had been incapacitated.

In a moment of realization Daphne announced, "The Death Eaters aren't wearing their robes and they're wearing glamours, aren't they?"

Harry didn't respond, only nodded grimly.

It was tortuous. They were standing on the sidelines watching Aurors and guests be killed. Harry's primary job was to kill Voldemort. The seven friends had to protect Harry. This being the case, they couldn't wade into the mass of humanity in front of them, it was the Aurors job to get the situation under control. It was maddening to watch people die while feeling helpless to prevent it.

From the south entrance to the Atrium, by the lifts, came a series of barked orders. From her vantage point, Daphne could just see a line of Aurors Stunning everyone in front of them. Friend and foe alike was stunned and tied in magical ropes.

"Well done," commented Neville. "Sort out the sheep from the goats later."

"THERE! THERE HE IS! KILL HIM AND HIS WHORE!"

Daphne recognized the high pitched screaming voice. Finally, the bastard Voldemort had come out. As more people fell, some to Auror Stunning spells, other to Death Eater curses, Daphne wondered why she had been so eager for Voldemort and his bound slaves to come out.

.oOo.

Years later, Daphne and the other survivors of The Battle for the Ministry compared notes of their experiences from that horrible evening. In the moment, all agreed that they were only capable to act/react/move. There was little time to think about 'the big picture' as they were fighting for their lives. Late at night, with a snifter of brandy and a low fire, it was easier to stitch together the complete story.

Standing on the edge of the whirling mass of people, the Potters and their friends didn't know it, but Voldemort had managed to scrape up thirty Death Eaters. Of the thirty, seventeen were still school age. One didn't need to be a prodigy of the magical arts to cast the Reductor curse, though.

As Daphne had surmised, the Death Eaters were not wearing their usual garb. All were under glamour spells so as not to be recognized.

Lord Voldemort's plan had been simple, yet extraordinarily effective. Let the evening progress. The security teams would become more relaxed the longer the event progressed. Slowly they infiltrated the Atrium with their people but made no attempt to pass through the security screening blocking the grand to the grand hall.

All of his 'devoted followers' would be in the Atrium no later than 1130 PM. Each had a task to carry out as their cover. Some were to act as building service repairmen; a few were to be vagrants that always seemed to make their way to the Atrium at night.

Voldemort figured that the security would lapse at midnight. A few congratulatory handshakes and the like would distract the Aurors for a few minutes that he needed.

A wide area Confundus charm that would befuddle and incite over three hundred persons was not cast in a moment. On top of the Confundus charm, Voldemort was counting on the guest imbibing enough alcohol to increase significantly the effects of the curse. The

Dark Lord used the distraction of midnight to begin his incantation. Standing amidst the press of people that had boiled out of the grand hall, he raised his wand and chanted.

Sixty seconds later, the crowd was stampeding like thirsty cattle.

He had instructed his people to kill random bystanders in order to pull the Aurors into the press of humanity. Using the bystanders to form a maze or warren of a type was Voldemort's idea, and a good one it was. Not many can enter a snake's nest chasing after the reptile and emerge unscathed. Not many Aurors survived the experience that New Year's eve.

The Aurors might have been in a better situation, but Rufus Scrimgeour had been poisoned ten minutes before midnight. No one noticed the rat scurrying in the shadows of the grand hall doorway around eleven forty. It was too bad; much loss of life would have been prevented otherwise. Scrimgeour survived the evening, but the red robed law enforcement officers needed him that night. He retired two short years later, the unwarranted guilt too much for him to bear.

Voldemort had hoped that he could use Potter's foolish nobility to lure him into the press of humanity in the Atrium. He had given up hope of that when he spotted his prey lurking on the edge of battle like a coward.

His overall goal had been to lure Potter into the melee to kill him before retreating. Over time he could rebuild his strength, but Potter needed to be dealt with immediately. Unfortunately for Tom Marvolo Riddle, the sight of Harry, with Daphne at his side, incensed the Dark Lord beyond reason. In his fury, he called out direction to his followers.

"THERE! THERE HE IS! KILL HIM AND HIS WHORE!"

.oOo.



At this point, Daphne's memories became hazy. The scenes she remembered were in vivid detail. Harry drawing his sword from under his robes. Tonks shrieking while she cursed an opponent. Remus reaching in his pocket to withdraw his own shrunken sword. Neville transformed into the Bear and mauling an opponent. Susan casting the first curse that immolated a charging opponent. Hermione and Bill fighting back to back.

Harry had urged the team away from the crowd of people, hoping to force the Death Eaters to break cover. It worked.

Bursting out of the herd of humanity, ten people led the charge at Harry and Daphne. Susan's high powered Blasting curse disintegrated the lead Death Eater leaving behind only a slick, bloody spot on the marble floor. Susan's casting urged the rest of the friends to cast as well. Of the seven spells fired, five found their targets, dropping them quickly.

Then it came to grappling range. The Death Eaters moved into the mix of the friends casting Unforgivables and the darkest spells imaginable. Shields and conjured barriers snapped into place.

Daphne growled with frustration. Her opponent was a tall, reedy man that she didn't recognize. He had her on the defensive, dodging and shielding. Screaming her rage, she lashed out with two Bone Breaking hexes that impacted the man's knees.

As he crumpled to the ground, Daphne turned to see a Killing curse coming at her face.

Before she could even think, all the hours spent dodging hexes in the Room of Pain paid off. Rolling and diving to her right, the curse roared over her head.

Jumping back to her feet, she didn't even notice that her dress had

ripped the seam due to her exertions. The caster of the Killing curse was leveling his wand at her to follow up. Daphne snap cast the Piercing curse, drilling a hole in the man's shoulder. He screamed and lashed out with his right foot. Daphne crumpled as the man's foot hit her knee which had been destroyed at Malfoy Manor.

From the ground, Daphne cast a quick vertical spread of Reductor curses. Her opponent shielded, but was rocked back on his heels.

Panting hard, she aimed her wand at the man's face, but at the last moment pointed down and cast the Cutting curse.

She had been hoping to hit his knees, intending to give the expression 'taking him out at the knees' a whole new meaning. Instead, she overshot the mark and amputated the man's left foot just as his Bludgeoning hex impacted her chest.

Rocked back on her heels, she gasped for breath. Her opponent was down, but hardly out. Without thought, she leveled her wand and cast the Reductor curse at the man's head.

If her dress hadn't been ruined before, it certainly was now.

From behind her, she heard a gurgling cry. She turned to see Remus dispatching her opponent from before – the one with the broken knees. Apparently, the man was attempting to curse her from behind. A sword in the throat put paid to that idea.

Looking around, she didn't see any more opponents. Except one.

Harry and Voldemort were a blur of motion; casting, punching, lashing out with weapons, screaming.

Harry was wounded in at least a dozen places. Blood poured down his face and his left arm was limp. Voldemort was missing his left arm at the shoulder, and was dragging his right leg. When Daphne looked

closely, she could see bone sticking out of a tear in the twisted man's trousers. Apparently, the man had black blood now, as it was coating his exposed right forearm.

Daphne stood, gasping still – she had four broken ribs – and attempted to assist her husband. Stumbling forward, she hit an invisible wall that she was unable to pass. Turning to her right, she asked Neville, "Can you get by?"

Neville, his face cut and swollen, merely shook his head in negation. It seemed that Fate herself was forcing the conclusion of the long enmity between Harry and Riddle.

In the background, Daphne heard, but didn't register, Dumbledore's successful efforts to calm the incited crowd. His wide area sleeping charm finally took effect after ten minutes, causing the stampede to fall to the ground, dead asleep.

Running feet came up from behind and Daphne saw Amelia, Connie and many others join her in mute helplessness as Harry and the Dark Lord did everything in their power to destroy each other.

Seconds ticked by. Harry dodged several Killing curses, returning them with Bone Crushing hexes. Daphne groaned in fear as Voldemort shielded faster than any person she'd ever seen.

Harry's expression never changed. His wand became a blur as he ripped a spread of Reductor curses in a vertical spread. Having the offensive advantage, he wasn't going to let up. He had given Voldemort a chance to regroup and attack during their encounter in Diagon Alley. There was one thing that Roland had successfully taught him: Never fight fair.

Increasing his advantage, Harry spot apparated to Voldemort's right side and kicked the Dark Lord in his injured right leg. Riddle screamed in pain, giving Harry the opening to finish him once and for

all.

The Stunning spell is derided amongst most professional warriors. It is far too easily reversed and therefore doesn't really allow one to permanently defeat an opponent.

Yet, that's exactly what Harry used to immobilize Tom Riddle. Moving faster than the eye could track, Harry cast his spell.

After the bright red flash dropped the man, silence reigned for long minute. All the Death Eaters had been killed – no Imperius curse claims this time.

Harry glanced at Daphne and gave her a little smile. He wavered and then flicked his wand at Voldemort's fallen body. As the Dark Lord floated to waist height in front of Harry, Daphne's fear ratcheted up to terror.

She had known that Harry could defeat Voldemort in a fight. Oh, nothing was truly sure in life, especially in magical combat. Nevertheless, Harry was plenty good enough to take the man down. This ritual her husband was about to perform, however, had far too many variables for her liking.

Using his right hand to place his injured left hand on Voldemort's head, Harry then placed his right hand on Voldemort's breast. It was a quiet second when Harry gave a great heaving sigh, then began to chant.

Daphne knew the words for she had helped Harry memorize the incredibly long exorcism and banishing ritual. She couldn't help but murmur them along with her husband. Ten seconds into his recital, Harry began to tremble.

"Oh, no," Daphne groaned. He was in the first stanza of the incantation, calling for judgment upon the transgressor.

Based on Remus' research, they knew the spell would be painful for Harry. Given Harry's extraordinary high tolerance for pain, the fact that it was visibly affecting him so soon in the ritual did not bode well.

Neville wrapped his arm around Daphne's shoulders, while Hermione moved to her side. Her friends were supporting her, but who was supporting Harry?

Remembering when she'd unintentionally helped her husband through Voldemort's mental attacks, Daphne tried to project all the love, affection, caring she felt for Harry. Focusing on his face, she dredged up every positive memory she felt for him. She immersed herself in the emotion they evoked, reveling in the memories. With a grunting effort, she tried to will the collection across the ten feet that separated her from her husband.

Twenty seconds into the ritual, Harry began to shake. It was the second incantation. Harry was offering himself as a compensatory offering should the transgressor be found clear of want.

A few times, he stopped his incantation as he was panting in pain. Unbidden, tears began to run down Daphne's face. Her internal voice was screaming for him to hurry. Be done with this. She could barely bring herself to watch him suffer so. Closing his eyes, Harry forced himself to continue.

Thirty seconds into the ritual, Harry fell to the ground, moaning in pain. The judgment was occurring.

Frantic that Harry would be taken in lieu of Voldemort, Daphne tried to push past the invisible barrier, but it held. The silence in the atrium continued, as Harry forced himself to his feet, replaced his hands on the still floating form of Lord Voldemort and continued.

His face began to contort with the agony he felt. Twitches in his arms

and legs betrayed the searing pain that was coursing up and down his limbs. Now, a small glowing light began to form between the two antagonists. The final phase, the call for penalty, had begun.

As if from far away, a rushing sound began. It reminded some of the bystanders of wind through the trees and others of water in a gorge. As the light between Harry and Voldemort intensified, the sound grew. Larger and louder the light and sound became until Harry Potter and Tom Riddle were completely obscured.

This effect had not been written of in the Black Family grimoire. Desperate, Daphne looked to the nearby Remus for an explanation. His face alit with fear; Moony of the Marauders merely answered her plea with, "I don't know."

A loud CRUMP sounded from the entwined combatants. Pure energy radiated out from them in a shock wave, knocking all the spectators to the ground. Daphne looked up, found her husband and began to smile through her tears.

Harry stood there, swaying on his feet. Riddle's body was a smoking, charred husk. He met her gaze, smiled and passed out.

## Chapter the Last

30 June 2126 Monday

The old woman at the podium paused in her tale. She looked out over the massive crowd that had been sitting for the last three hours to listen to her tell of days long ago. The families around the two late middle aged men and one woman in the front row smiled up at her and she smiled back at them.

"Our lives were much simpler after Harry disposed of that vermin. We ended up having a spring wedding ceremony; it was quite anti-climactic. After all, we'd been married almost a year by that

point."

Her bright blue eyes crinkled with her smile as she remembered, "Neville proposed to Susan after the reception. They had a lovely wedding and I'd never seen Lady Augusta so happy. They stood as godparents to our eldest, James Sirius and for our little girl, Elizabeth Jane. They were lovely people and I miss them both. Ten years ago they left us on the next great adventure."

After a long pause, the Dowager Lady Potter continued, "History books tell us that after Voldemort was vanquished, Albus Dumbledore was content to retire into obscurity. The truth is that after Voldemort was disposed of, Harry and I paid the man a visit. We very politely reminded him of all the wrongs he had visited upon Harry and entreated him to retire from all of his offices." She smiled wickedly and commented, "He seemed to be of our way of thinking. Filius was an excellent Headmaster."

"Harry was quite insistent that the Black and Potter families have their own heads. Each family was deserving of the attention of their Head he often said. Therefore, today our sons James and Neville come into their inheritance as the Earl of Potter and Viscount Black respectively. They will fill the shoes of their father most admirably."

She sighed and her eyes focused on far away times. "We lost Remus not forty years after Voldemort was exterminated. The lycanthropy caught up with him and wore him out. He was a truly gentle man, so at odds with his affliction. He died at home with his beloved Tonks, their two children and four grandchildren. Teddy and little Daphne kissed their father as he died in his wife's arms."

Shaking her head she went on, "Tonks became even more reckless after Remus passed on. She started to accompany the Aurors again and was killed during a raid not two years later. The Lupins are buried next to Harry's parents and Sirius' marker in the family plot at Rowan Hill. I visit them from time to time."

"Hermione and Bill went their separate ways as many a couple does. Happily for all of us they remained friends. Not long afterwards, Bill married Fleur Delacour and Hermione married Joseph Driscoll, an Irishman from Cork. Her twenty year career as the Minister for Magic of Great Britain is storied, I need not recount it here. Most also know that their daughter, Maire, married our son Neville. It has been a true joy having her as my daughter."

The blond woman in the front row beamed at her mother in law, tears on her face like the rest of the family.

To the bulk of the multitude gathered, the people Daphne was talking about were the stuff of legends.

Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived and the Man-Who-Conquered.

Neville Longbottom, the right hand of Harry Potter.

Susan Bones, one of the most feared Warriors of the Light.

Remus Lupin, the Chimera Slayer.

Amelia Bones, the Minister for Magic who stood tall in the dark years.

Hermione Granger, the most famous Minister for Magic for five hundred years.

Nymphadora Tonks, Auror extraordinaire and Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement for over twenty years.

Daphne Potter, one of two people to wound the Dark Lord and wife of Harry Potter.

To Jimmy, Nev, and Lizzie Potter they were Dad, Uncle Nev and Auntie Sue. Great Auntie Ami. Uncle Moony and Auntie Tonks.



Auntie Hermione. Mum. They were all family, nothing special.

In the end, all that was left of the greatest generation that stood against the tide of darkness was in front of them in a black dress, her white hair up in an elaborate braid.

"We bury my husband today. He was the best man I've ever known. The most loving, brave, caring, compassionate, bold, helpful, loyal, dedicated man I've ever known. I've loved him for the last one hundred and thirty years."

She looked at the coffin off to her left and a single tear tracked down her wrinkled cheek.

"I love you, Harry."

.oOo.

"I'll just sit by the window for a bit, Jimmy. It's been quite a long day. Don't worry about me, I may even nod off for a bit."

Daphne had an old quilt on her lap that Susan had given her many years ago. Looking out the window of the Sitting Room, she could see the path to the beach that she and Harry had trod so many times. Countless times. She sniffled a bit and blotted her eyes with her handkerchief.

"I'll just be in the study, Mum. If you need anything, send for Toby, he'll come get me." Jimmy Potter was the spitting image of his father and grandfather before him. The speckling of grey in his hair belied his one hundred and fifteen years. Harry, himself, had died with more black in his hair than grey.

Daphne nodded and continued staring out the window, lost in her grief.

"I love you, mum."

Giving her eldest son a watery smile, she reached out and grasped his hand. Squeezing it, she responded, "I love you too, son. Your Emily has been a wonder. I love her and your boys too. Thank you."

A bit puzzled, Jimmy kissed his mother's wrinkled cheek and left the room.

Settling back into her chair, Daphne drifted.

Not long later, she heard a voice calling her. Opening her eyes, she saw her beloved standing in front of her. Not the old man whose wounds from so long ago finally took their toll. Instead, she saw the hale and hearty man he had been when Jimmy was born.

Extending his hand to her, he entreated, "Come, my love. It's time."

She took his hand, surprised to see her hand was young and supple, like his. Smiling, she rose and embraced him. After a long moment, they broke apart and he gave her a little kiss.

"Come on, everyone is waiting and I want you to meet my parents and Sirius."

The End.

1. I own nothing. Sob.

2. Recommendation for the chapter is Deluded Musings/clell's Harry Potter and the Marriage Contracts.

3. Wow. It's done and I'm completely amazed. Born from an idea that wouldn't leave me alone when I hit a tough spot in To Stand Against the Darkness, Partners is my first story finished. Clocking in at over

170,000 words and many hours on my laptop, it has been a joy (and sometimes a pain) to write about my version of the life and times of Harry and Daphne Potter, from Daphne's perspective. I'd always intended for the story to be a eulogy (see my nod to Jeconais at the end of Chapter 1), but instead of the faux eulogy of Perfect Situations, I thought I'd go for the real thing.

4. I'd like to point out the stories and their authors who have inspired me in writing Partners: Jeconais' Perfect Situations and Matroyshka Vignettes, kb0's The Grass is Always Greener, Deluded Musings/clell's Harry Potter and the Marriage Contracts.

5. Thank you so much to you readers who have kept coming back for the last nine months as this story has unfolded. The consistent reviewers (you know who you are) have really inspired and reassured this fledgling author. Thanks to all who have given constructive feedback.

6. Yes, Mother Wilma's is lifted from Sunset Over Britain/Sunrise Over Britain. It's a great ready-made charity. Consider it flattery, not theft.

7. Maire is pronounced Mary. I should know, it's what we named one of my daughters.